

## **Abstract**

This study examines the creation and professionalisation of a recognisable English couture industry in the mid-twentieth century and in particular the role designer collaboration played within this process. The focal point is the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers, a design group established as a wartime measure in order to preserve and protect a number of London's made-to-measure dress houses and to promote the creative aspirations of the wider British fashion industry. The focus on this specific design group and collaborative practice, rather than the individual couturiers, offers an exceptional case study of designers working in association and the impact this can have on design practice.

A number of central themes emerge that focus on the networks and mediated representations that supported this field of design. In dealing with these themes this study recognises that the Incorporated Society's formation and operation did not occur in a vacuum but within a specific industrial, political, economic and social infrastructure. It therefore explores the networks and narratives that were used to sustain its specific form of luxury fashion production throughout a particularly turbulent period.

Today London is acknowledged, alongside Paris, New York and Milan, as one of the world's major fashion cities and this thesis aims to achieve a better understanding of the role couturier-collaboration played in the early development of this recognition. Through the analysis of an extensive range of previously unconsidered primary material it questions whether and how, through the process of collaboration, the London couturiers established unprecedented and much needed cohesion for British design talent and the exact nature of their role within the construction and understanding of London as an internationally recognised fashion centre.

The period under consideration allows not only an exploration of the creation of a London couture industry but also the cultural politics of design practice throughout a difficult period of economic depression, war and post-war reconstruction. In so doing, it explores the wider significance of the Incorporated Society's elite made-to-measure dressmakers both for and beyond the discipline of Design History.



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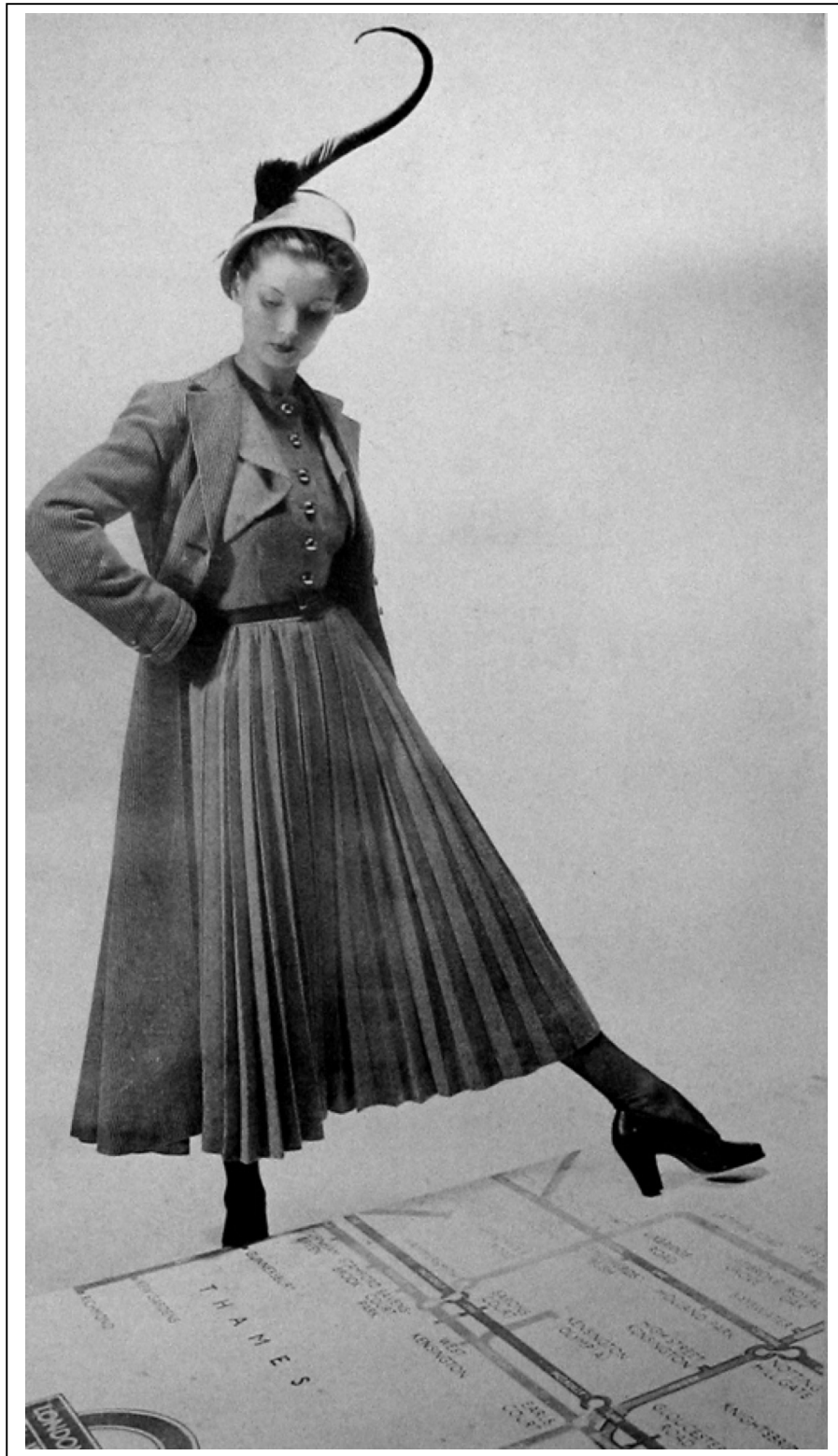
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## Introduction





In 1948 an image by the photographer Zoltan Glass for the September issue of the trade magazine *Fashion and Fabrics Overseas* accompanied a feature entitled 'Tweed Returns'. The young mannequin it depicted was posed in perfectly tailored day clothes, executed in wool, with one foot on a map of the London Underground (Figure 1). The model she wore, designed and produced by Victor Stiebel, a member of the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers, for his Autumn/Winter export collection represented not only the work of this couturier but also a specific design identity for this trade group and more broadly for Britain's fashion and textile industry.<sup>1</sup>

In the same month, for British *Vogue*, the photographer Cecil Beaton staged the Incorporated Society's daywear next to the Albert Memorial, another cornerstone of London iconography that, having survived the Blitz untouched, was an emblem of national endurance (Figure 2). In the garments selected, the London fashion designers' symbolic and commercial counters to the privations of the war years were made clear. In the softer silhouettes, small waists and long, full skirts, the design of the suits adhered to the fashion industry's search for a new post-war silhouette.

As a measure of London's couture industry these are both confident images. The skillfully tailored town and country wear, the Underground map and the Albert Memorial speak of movement, travel and tourism and promote London as an assured destination for fashion design. These photographs of bespoke clothing, disseminated at a time when a skirt's length and hem-span was carefully monitored and reported by journalists as a 'barometer of the prosperity of nations,' are representative of an industrial ambition to make couture production an important facet within the British economy.<sup>2</sup> This thesis will explore the process undertaken by England's made-to-measure dressmakers throughout the 1930s and 1940s that led to this confidence. Today London is acknowledged, alongside Paris, New York and Milan, as one of the world's major fashion cities and this study will explore the role that the establishment of an English couture industry played in the development of London as an internationally recognised fashion centre.

The focal point of this study is the development of the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers, an association established as a wartime measure to

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the thesis the term 'model' and 'mannequin' are used as they were in the timeframe under consideration. Model therefore refers to the couture garment produced as a design template for production and mannequin to the women used for its demonstration.

<sup>2</sup> Alison Settle, 'Economics of the New Look: French campaign to make dollars out of textiles', *Yorkshire Post*, 18 February 1948



Figure 2: Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers July Collection 1948

Left: Victor Stiebel model

Right: Peter Russell model

*Vogue* September 1948

Photographer: Cecil Beaton

preserve and protect a number of London's creative couture businesses. In its first year the Society brought together nine designers and couture houses: Norman Hartnell, Hardy Amies, Bianca Mosca, Digby Morton, Peter Russell, Victor Stiebel, Worth (London), Edward Molyneux and Charles Creed. The Society was to remain exclusive, indeed between 1946 and 1962 it only recruited a further eight members: Angele Delanghe, Michael Sherard, Giuseppe Mattli, Lachasse, John Cavanagh, Ronald Paterson, Michael Donellan, and Clive Evans. These designer-members and the British textile export groups of the wool, cotton, rayon, silk and lace industries financed it. Representatives from the export groups, alongside Lord Derby (Patron of the Cotton Board), acted as its vice-presidents. In 1942 Margaret Havinden (the account executive of Crawford's Advertising Agency) operated as its first chairman and Daisy Fellowes (the socialite and heiress to the Singer sewing machine fortune) as its first president. For a little over thirty years, until 1975 when it was officially dissolved, the Incorporated Society was the nucleus of the British couture industry.<sup>3</sup>

Originally conceived in Paris and produced for consumption by a wealthy and fashionable elite, couture, the practice of creative made-to-measure womenswear, was internationally acknowledged as inherently French and the fashion industry's most prestigious and creative form. By the 1930s, when the London couture industry began to emerge, French couture models were also the main source of fashion inspiration throughout all levels of the international fashion industry. This was particularly the case for the American market, which had strong connections with Paris-based couturiers who operated as its main source of inspiration and style guidance not only through the sale of original models but also through their licensed reproduction and adaptation.

Since the 1860s the designation of couturier and the boundaries of this form of production had been regulated and protected as a specifically French operation by the *Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne* (the trade union/guild of Parisian bespoke dressmaking). According to the dominant narratives of the western fashion system the *Chambre Syndicale* was set up at this point by Charles Frederick Worth to promote, protect and consolidate the creative autonomy of fashion producers and the hegemony of Paris in this form of production. Within this structure couturiers were given validation not just as made-to-measure dressmakers that responded to the whims of elite clients but rather as style dictators who created fashion. It was not until 1942 that the

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<sup>3</sup> *Dissolved Companies Record 1975: No of Company 371721 The Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers*, 26 August 1975, (BT 31/45170 Public Record Office, Kew, London)

Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers, a similar but less official body, was created in Britain. This lag in British and French legislation is indicative of different national attitudes towards this field of design and underpins the critical exploration of this study. The Chambre Syndicale offered business protection and reinforced the Parisian couturiers' claims to creative supremacy. That the British elite dressmaker was not offered any form of official collaborative structure until the Second World War suggests that either the country did not have a creative industry to protect before this point or, as is the contention of this study's argument, it highlights a changed national attitude towards both creative design autonomy and the importance of London being viewed as a source of fashion. With France so far ahead in this design field, the emergence of a London couture industry and the creation of the Incorporated Society at a time of intense political and economic instability positions the analysis of designer-collaboration as an agent of control and offers an interesting example of an attempt to shift power within the international fashion system.

The Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers represented the interests of London's couturiers, yet the name chosen pointed to a level of unease in the use of this French term. The specification that its members were 'fashion designers' was a product of its time, as wartime nationalism and egalitarianism ensured that the designation couturiers would not only have been foreign but also elitist. In the 1930s there was a notable uncertainty in the terms used to describe the London made-to-measure dressmakers' practice. This fluctuated from court dressmaker, to dressmaker, or alternatively to dress or fashion designer. The first two terms were primarily used in relation to the production of garments for specific clients, whereas the latter were utilized when the designers' models were reproduced or adapted by other fashion producers. In 1942, when the society was created, the whole idea of a London-based couture industry was still very new, however, by the post war period the term couturier was the main designation used for the Society's members. The title 'The Incorporated Society of London Couturiers' was something that was often debated throughout the post-war period. The minutes of the Incorporated Society held at the Archive of Art and Design in London document many debates about changing the name to include the words 'couturiers' rather than 'fashion designers', particularly as overseas buyers commented on its 'awkwardness'. Yet even by 1949 this alteration was still agreed to be 'unwise'.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Minutes of the Incorporated Society's Designer Meeting, held at the Archive of Art and Design, London (AAD/1989/6), 27 Feb 1949 (hereafter: MISDM)

Hardy Amies' response to the question of whether he wished to be called a 'fashion designer', posed in a radio interview broadcast by the BBC in that year, was that whilst he found this term appropriate he liked to be called 'a couturier, a French word, but it does sort of mean that you do more than actually dress design which is in fact what I do.'<sup>5</sup> In his 1954 autobiography, *Just So Far*, Amies asserted that:

What I have done is to found a *couture* house, which, so far as it can be in these difficult days, is now well established. This achievement, of course, has in some measure been due to my taste as a designer, but equally so I consider it has been due to my skill as a *couturier*, in that I have been able to bring out the best in all the people who work for me; for I am a conductor of an orchestra, or let us muddle up our similes quite completely, I am the father of a family. [...] I invented a motto, which I rather pompously had translated in Latin. It is "Less than art and greater than trade." I still think it is a good description of our business.<sup>6</sup>

Amies' assessment of being a couturier, which through the establishment of a craft-based dress house that twice yearly produced seasonal collections of original designs placed it above the mere concerns of commerce and positioned this practice as wider than that of either dressmaker or fashion designer. The suggestion that couture lies in a space partly between cultural and commercial production, is particularly interesting and points to the inbetween status of the couturier within design historical discourse. 'Less than art and greater than trade' positions the craft of made-to-measure over machine-made manufacture; exclusivity and elitism over universality; creative integrity over commerciality. At a time of economic and political instability these were clearly ideas that had taken on a particular national resonance and this thesis will explore why this was the case.

The Incorporated Society's stipulations for membership were based on the production of made-to-measure garments based on original designs. This was similar to the expectations of '*Couture-Création*' set out by the Parisian Chambre Syndicale, yet the Society did not impose the strict rules that governed all aspects of French couture production and distribution. These stipulated that to be considered *Couture-Création* a designer had to create and present at least twenty-five models on live mannequins in a Paris-based couture house twice yearly. There were specific rules that governed the

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<sup>5</sup> 'The World of Creative Fashion' *BBC Radio Debate*, 14 August 1949 (BBC Written Archive Microfilm Transcript)

<sup>6</sup> Hardy Amies, *Just So Far* (London: Collins, 1954) p.166. A reservation in using the term *couture* and *couturier* is highlighted throughout this autobiography by these terms being placed in italics.

production of the original models covering aspects such as the number of in-house employees, the technical execution of the made to measure process, the number of model fittings and even how these models were presented and sold.<sup>7</sup> The structural difference between the Incorporated Society and the *Chambre Syndicale* was not just one of scale (there were 70 registered houses in Paris in 1946, in comparison to 10 in London) but also of organisation.<sup>8</sup> ‘Half union and half guild,’ the *Chambre Syndicale* was a large administrative body with considerable industrial power.<sup>9</sup> Supported by government subsidies drawn from the textile industry, it operated as a judicial and legislative body. It protected French couturiers from style piracy, whilst it also coordinated aspects such as foreign relations and press coverage. In comparison, the Incorporated Society was self-appointed and regulated by its designer-members, its funds were limited and its administrative team consisted of one secretary.

Although created by a small number of London-based couturiers without government funding, the idea that the Incorporated Society’s objectives should be broader than merely the commercial concerns of its members’ businesses was enshrined in its *Articles of Association*, which is held in the National Archive in Kew London. Here, the two most fundamental aims were firstly; to maintain and develop the reputation of London as a creative fashion centre and secondly; to collaborate with manufacturers and others involved in the industry to ‘increase the prestige’ of British fashion and textiles and encourage their demand in foreign markets.<sup>10</sup> In 1942, such objectives were clearly dictated by the economic and political situation brought about by the Second World War, for whilst Britain had to turn much of its industrial production over to the war effort it still needed to maintain its exports to bring finance into the country. Historians such as Lou Taylor, Christopher Breward and Amy de la Haye acknowledge that the Incorporated Society was established as a reaction to the German

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<sup>7</sup> In 1945 the *Chambre* set out two specific classes of production *Couture* and *Couture-Création* the distinction between the two was carefully defined and regulated. The later category was the most prestigious, and only in this class could the title ‘*Couturier*’, ‘*Haute Couturier*’, be used, in the former it was ‘*Artisan Maître Couturier*’, ‘*Couturiere*’, and ‘*Couture*’ the category a house belonged to was decided by a jury of textile representatives and the *Chambre*’s administrative team. For further detail on the operation of the *Chambre Syndicale* see Mary Brooks Picken and Dora Loues Miller, *Dressmakers of France: The Who, How and Why of French Couture* (New York: Harpers and Bros., 1956) pp. 9 – 18. Jeannette A. Jarnow and Beatrice Judelle, *Inside the Fashion Business* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1965) pp. 89 – 128. Diana de Marly, *The History of Haute Couture, 1850 - 1950* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1980) pp. 106 – 107, 195 – 197. Alexandra Palmer, *Couture and Commerce: The Transatlantic Fashion Trade in the 1950s* (University of British Columbia Press, 2004) pp. 14 -17

<sup>8</sup> Palmer, 2004, p. 15

<sup>9</sup> Marjorie Dunton, ‘La *Chambre Syndicale*,’ in *Couture: An Illustrated History of the Great Paris Designers and Their Creations*, edited by Ruth Lynam (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1972) pp. 40 – 49

<sup>10</sup> *Memorandum and Articles of Association of The Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers*, Registered 6 January 1942. (Board of Trade Records BT64). For full details see Appendix 1

occupation of France, which had severed the international fashion market from Paris.<sup>11</sup> This offered scope for the rise of other internationally recognised design centres and London, which in the 1930s had developed its own small-scale couture industry, presented a viable European alternative. The business manager of British *Vogue* magazine, Harry Yoxall, who drew up the Constitution for the Incorporated Society, offered a precise summary of the group's wartime objectives for 'without Paris,' he claimed it presented 'two obvious possibilities', firstly in terms of the national and international market 'albeit on a very small scale, [it offered] an alternate source of design authority'. Secondly, for the British government the London couturiers offered an alternative 'peg on which to hang' the country's export of textiles.<sup>12</sup>

### Period and Rationale

The period of study and rationale for this research is drawn from the Incorporated Society's original objectives to preserve the London couture industry and to collaborate with the broader British fashion and textile industry to increase exports. In recognition of the fact that the Incorporated Society was created to protect and develop an already established industry, this study spans the years 1930 to 1950. Before the interwar period, while London was acknowledged as an important Imperial capital, this recognition was mainly as the 'city of business' in contrast to the notion of Paris as the 'city of pleasure', and it had not been particularly associated with women's fashion.<sup>13</sup> In terms of British high-level clothing production, this led to a gendered understanding, a binary, which historically saw London as a centre for elite male tailoring and Paris as the centre for creative women's dressmaking. Evidence taken from a range of national and international fashion magazines and press reports demonstrates that it was not until the middle of the 1930s that many of the Incorporated Society's founder members were recognised as authorities in the production of original women's fashions. Historians agree that the 1930s saw the emergence of a London couture industry and that by the 1950s, largely due to the creation of the Incorporated Society, London had achieved

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<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Wilson and Lou Taylor, *Through the Looking Glass: A History of Dress from 1860 to the Present Day* (London: BBC Books, 1989), Christopher Breward, *Fashioning London: Clothing and the Modern Metropolis* (Berg, 2004), Amy De la Haye, *The Cutting Edge: 50 years of British fashion 1947 - 1997* (London: V & A Publications, 1998)

<sup>12</sup> Harry W. Yoxall, *A Fashion of Life*, (London: Taplinger Publishing Co., Inc., 1966), p. 71

<sup>13</sup> Claire Hancock, 'Capitale du Plaisir: the Remaking of Paris' in *Imperial Cities: landscape Display and Identity*, edited by Felix Driver and David Gilbert (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999)

international recognition as a fashion centre. However a full examination of how this position was attained prior to the 1950s has not yet been attempted.<sup>14</sup>

The first half of this thesis therefore considers the factors that led to the creation of a London couture industry in the interwar period. This acts as the foundation for the subsequent chapters to offer a comparative understanding of the process of both continuity and transformation that took place in the wartime and within the immediate post-war period of reconstruction. The success that historians recognise in the 1950s was based on a framework previously established to sustain this form of luxury production throughout a period of national emergency, austerity, and rising egalitarianism. Within the wartime economy of the 1940s the couturiers had to react to and navigate a series of government restrictions imposed on clothing production, and by 1949, when the system of clothes rationing finally ended, the identity, operation and boundaries of the London couture industry had been fully established. The period of this study therefore facilitates not only a consideration of the creation of a London couture industry but also the cultural politics of design practice throughout a difficult economic period of depression, war, and post-war reconstruction.<sup>15</sup>

In terms of this study's rationale, the Society's specified aims - to assume design authority, elevate the level of design in British fashion and textiles, and thereby play an important role within the British export agenda - allowed the London couturiers to be addressed specifically as a body of official tastemakers. This viewpoint lets the analysis of the London couture industry question the role high-level fashion played within British design reform. This, to a certain extent, positions the study alongside earlier histories of British design that followed a narrative of reform and focused on groups of designer tastemakers who promoted design improvement for both economic and ideological

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<sup>14</sup> See for example, Amy de la Haye, 'The Fourth Generation' in *A Family of Fashion: The Messels: Six Generations of Dress*, edited by de la Haye et al. (Philip Wilson Publishers, 2006) pp. 92 – 111 (99) and Edwina Ehrman, 'Broken Traditions: 1930 – 55' in *The London Look: fashion from street to catwalk*, edited by Christopher Breward et. al. (London: Yale University Press, 2004) pp.97 – 116

<sup>15</sup> To clarify the use of the term English and British in relation to the London couture, there is a general consensus that throughout the period of this study whilst Englishness and Britishness were often fused, the British were usually seen as 'English in their culture'. Whilst English is therefore understood as a cultural term, its nature is geographically and socially specific. As the political historian Richard Johnson has suggested British society should be viewed 'as a series of concentric circles' with a centre (based in London and the Home Counties) that defines the whole. The networks surrounding the London couture, the environment in which it operated, its elite made-to-measure garments and the clients it catered to placed its practice firmly at the centre of English culture. Therefore London couture in its practice and its cultural connotations will be read as English. For a further exploration of the definition of English and British see Richard Johnson, *The Politics of Recession*, (London: Macmillan, 1985), pp. 234-5.



reasons.<sup>16</sup> For the discipline of Design History, this approach to the subject may feel slightly regressive, for as Jonathan Woodham has pointed out, 'given the tendency of what might be termed "first generation" historians of design to focus on their workings and supposed import [...] there, has been an implicit assumption among many working in the field that the historical intricacies and significance of design organizations have already been explored in sufficient depth'.<sup>17</sup> Yet this is an understanding that his work into bodies such as the Council of Industrial Design has sought to challenge.<sup>18</sup> Studies into agents of design reform, particularly in the mid-twentieth century have however primarily focused on advocates and proselytizers for 'good design,' which adhered to the tenets of Modernism and the search for a universal, egalitarian and rational style within industrial design. In comparison fashion design has been left out of this discourse, probably because its gendered, seemingly irrational, search for novelty rendered it incompatible to such ideals. In so doing, not only the Incorporated Society, but also fashion itself, remains firmly open to this area of design historical research.

In the context of a doctoral thesis a study of specific designer-dressmakers who created clothing for the social elite appears to be an unfashionable academic choice. Since the late 1980s, the mainstream of Design History has not only moved away from its initial focus on design reform but also from the creativity and artistry of specific designers, a method described by Hazel Conway as design history's 'heroic age approach' or more recently by the design writer Peter Hall in his 2014 symposium paper as its 'great men narratives'.<sup>19</sup> The focus of much research has moved from production towards consumption and then the everyday use of design. More common within recent

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<sup>16</sup> For example: Fiona MacCarthy, *All Things Bright and Beautiful: Design in Britain 1830 to Today* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1972), Noel Carrington, *Industrial Design in Britain*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1976), Richard Stewart, *Design and British Industry* (London: John Murray, 1987), Jonathan Woodham, *The Industrial Designer and the Public* (London: Pembrige, 1983)

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan M. Woodham, 'Britain Can Make It and the History of Design', in *Design and Cultural Politics in Post-war Britain: The Britain Can Make It Exhibition of 1946*, edited by Patrick J. Maguire and Jonathan M. Woodham (London: Leicester University Press, 1997) p. 18

<sup>18</sup> This is a major area of Jonathan Woodham's research see his, 'Putting the Industrial Into Design: Early Problems Facing the Council of Industrial Design', in *Design and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain: Britain Can Make it Exhibition of 1946*, edited by Patrick Maguire & Jonathan M. Woodham (University of Leicester Press, 1998), also 'The Design Archive at Brighton: serendipity and strategy', *Art Libraries Journal*, 29 (3) 2004, pp.15-22, also 'The Festival of Britain and the Council of Industrial Design: Educating the Consumer in Postwar Britain', *Crafts Magazine*, September/October, 2001, also 'Managing British Design Reform I: Fresh Perspectives on the Early Years of the Council of Industrial Design', *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 9, no. 1, 1996, pp 55-65 and 'Managing British Design Reform II: The Film - An Ill-Fated Episode in the Politics of 'Good Taste', *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 9, no. 2, 1996, pp 101-115

<sup>19</sup> Hazel Conway, *Design History: A Students' Handbook*, (London: Harper Collins, 1987), Peter Hall, 'Narratives of History', paper given at the *Narratives and Design Studies: A Task of Translation Symposium* at Parsons the New School of Design, New York, 7 – 8 March 2014. Both authors trace this tradition within Design History to the 1936 seminal work of Nicolas Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius* (Palazzo Editions, 2011)

methodology is a 'bottom up' process that considers the wider cultural, social, economic and political atmosphere in which design is consumed and operates. The decision in this research to focus on designer collaboration in fact allows the analysis to move away from the devalued method of viewing designers as autonomous artists or authors, to one that considers the ways design practice can operate within a collaborative group structure.<sup>20</sup> Many studies of fashion designers have been notoriously uncritical and the collaborative element of practice is often ignored as individual creative agency is celebrated. However, the focus on the Incorporated Society and its pre-war predecessor the Fashion Group of Great Britain, rather than the individual couturiers, offers exceptional and hitherto little-explored case studies of designers working in association throughout a period of political, economical, cultural and social upheaval.

Themes: collaboration, networks, mediation, narratives

From this rationale, a number of central themes emerge that are not focused specifically on production or consumption but on collaboration and the networks and aspirations that supported this field of design. In dealing with these themes this study recognises that as a trade group the Incorporated Society's formation and operation did not occur in a vacuum but within a specific industrial and political network. The designers' official collaboration is therefore considered, and in large part explained, in terms of its interaction with other interest groups and fashion producers within Britain; for example, design reform bodies such as the little-known British Colour Council and the state-funded Council of Industrial Design and other trade associations such as the London (wholesale) Model House Group, and Textile Export Groups such as the Cotton Board. Predictably, due to the timeframe under consideration, when the couturiers were forced to react to a political environment of economic instability and 'problems of industrial performance [...] had a particular political edge', the British government and most specifically the Board of Trade constituted one of the most important elements within this network.<sup>21</sup>

This project's research process commenced during a moment of enthusiasm within Design History for Bruno Latour's actor-network-theory, clearly demonstrated at

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<sup>20</sup> For an interesting exploration of this movement away from the 'cult of personality' towards an examination of the collective and cumulative dimension of design see J. Michl, 'On Seeing Design as Redesign – An exploration of a Neglected Problem in Design Education,' *Scandinavian Journal of Design History*, 12, pp. 7 – 23

<sup>21</sup> Patrick J. Maguire, 'Introduction: Politics and Design in Post-war Britain', in *Design and Cultural Politics in Post war Britain: The Britain Can Make It Exhibition of 1946*, edited by Patrick J. Maguire and Jonathan M. Woodham (London: Leicester University Press, 1997) p. 3

the discipline's annual conference in 2008.<sup>22</sup> The focus on the strategies of a collaborative body of designers, within a specific national environment and socio-political network to a certain extent aligned with the embrace of this theory. Although it has received a subsequent academic backlash, the conference demonstrated that if used undogmatically Latour's theory had some useful lessons for design history. This was made clear at the conference where the range of interdisciplinary inquiry, whilst eclectic, encouraged design historians to think more carefully about the impact of networks on design practice. An interesting development at the conference was that a number of the participating design historians used the concept of networks to explore how the development and distribution of artefacts happens through negotiations between different interest groups.<sup>23</sup> Whilst this study does not use Latour's theory as a specific analytical framework, the idea that structures of commercial power develop as a result of negotiations between different interpretations, agendas, needs and desires offers an interesting approach to the London couture industry, particularly within a collaborative structure such as the Incorporated Society. This positions the London couturiers not only as practitioners focused on purely commercial concerns, but also as intermediaries within a specific political, cultural and industrial network.

The role of intermediaries within industrial and cultural production has recently entered the methodological approach of a number of disciplines. For example in Business History, this method has been explored by Regina Blaszczyk who coined the term 'fashion intermediaries' to describe the network of business professionals who studied the market, collected data about consumer taste and promoted products to meet public expectations.<sup>24</sup> Her book *Imagining Consumers: Design and Innovation from*

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<sup>22</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2005). For the papers given at the Annual Conference see, *Networks of Design, Proceedings of the Annual International Conference of the Design History Society* (UK) edited by Hackney, F., Glynn, J., & Minton, V., (University College Falmouth, 2008)

<sup>23</sup> See for example papers in these proceedings such as Kjetil Fallan, 'Conceptualising design competence in the framework of professional design practice', Sonia Ashmore 'Caspar Purdon Clare and the South Kensington Museum: textile networks between Britain and India 1850 – 1890', Dorothy Fox, 'Designing the Past: The National Trust as a socio-material agency', Anja Tollenaar 'The Central Register of Design Archives as a network or artefacts, metadata and cultural heritage institutions', Jeremy Tidgell, 'Does sustainability localise networks of design?' Wesley Beal, 'Theorising connectivity: the form and ideology of the network narrative'.

<sup>24</sup> For the development of this term see Regina L. Blaszczyk *Imagining Consumers: Design and Innovation from Wedgwood to Corning*, (John Hopkins University Press, 2000). For the interest of Business history in fashion, see Katrina Honeyman, and Andrew Godley, 'Introduction: Doing Business with Fashion', *Textile History*, Volume 34, Number 2, 2003, pp. 101 – 106. This edited edition stemmed from a conference at Reading University in December 2001, which for the first time brought together economic and business historians of the clothing industry with fashion and design historians. Similar interdisciplinary approaches were apparent in 'Fashions: Business Practices in Historical Perspective,' Joint Meeting of the Business

*Wedgwood to Corning*, published in 2000, whilst interested in consumption, focused on how mass-market producers, retailers and promoters in the American ceramics industry worked together to 'imagine' their consumers prior to the point of sale in order to design products that were commercially successful.<sup>25</sup> Such an approach is useful to design historians, for as Blaszczyk herself pointed out 'focusing on these fashion brokers as the primary agents of innovation turns the canon of design history inside out and upside down'.<sup>26</sup> The historian Penny Sparke acknowledged the importance and timeliness of this book for design history, although she felt it failed 'to link stylistic change with other significant historical shifts'.<sup>27</sup> Such a complaint has been addressed partly by Blaszczyk's edited anthology *Producing Fashion: Commerce, Culture and Consumers* and more fully by *The Colour Revolution*.<sup>28</sup> The former is the first book to bring together business historians who write specifically about fashion while the latter traces the relationship between colour and commerce. Both texts suggest a wider framework for the study of design production that considers the 'richly textured interplay between economic institutions and private individuals, social trends and belief systems, entrepreneurs and tastemakers, marketers and consumers'.<sup>29</sup> Here the role of business and markets become the important point for analysis in an examination of how this 'textured interplay' was created, established and maintained by business interaction. The fruitfulness of this approach can be seen in Tomoko Okawa's essay in *Producing Fashion*, which dispels the myth of the designer as sole creative genius through an exploration of the intricacies of licensing practices at the house of Dior.<sup>30</sup> What is particularly valuable about all three of Blaszczyk's books is their recognition of designers as part of a creative economy: a network that links a diversity of individuals and

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History Conference and the European Business History Association, Bocconi University, Milan, 11 - 13 June 2009

<sup>25</sup> See Blaszczyk, 2000. For comparable approaches to the generation of demand within business history, see Roy Church, and Andrew Godley, *The Emergence of Modern Marketing* (London: Routledge, 2003) and Sally H. Clarke, *Trust and Power: Consumers, the Modern Corporation and the Making of the United States Automobile Market* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

<sup>26</sup> Blaszczyk, 2000, p.12

<sup>27</sup> Penny Sparke, 'Imagining Consumers: Design and Innovation from Wedgwood to Corning, Book Review', *Technology and Culture*, Volume 42, Issue 2, p. 346

<sup>28</sup> Regina L. Blaszczyk, *The Colour Revolution*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2012) and *Producing Fashion: Commerce, Culture and Consumers* edited by R. L. Blaszczyk (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Tomoko Okawa, 'Licensing Practices at Maison Christian Dior', in Blaszczyk, 2008, pp. 82 – 107. Work within the field of sociology has also, through tracing the range of people, institutions and disseminating mechanisms within the industry discredited the view of fashion designers as the sole creators of fashion. See for example Diane Crane, *Fashion and its Social Agendas: Class, Gender and Identity in Clothing*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) and Yunika Kawamura, *Fashionology: An Introduction to Fashion Studies*, (Oxford: Berg, 2005)

organisations, which directly or indirectly intersect with and have an impact on both producers and consumers.<sup>31</sup>

These concerns mirror similar developments in cultural studies, where scholars have called for an examination of 'cultural intermediaries' in the consideration of commercially produced culture. This, as Sean Nixon and Paul Du Gay asserted in 2002, allows attention to move away from an 'over-emphasis on the moment of consumption', which had begun to dominate accounts of the commercial field:

In doing so, they [intermediaries] open up the links between production and consumption and the interplay between these discrete moments in the lifecycle of cultural forms. More than that, by focusing on both the formal expertise and broader intellectual and cultural formation of these practitioners, it becomes possible to scrutinise the links between economic and cultural practices within the sphere of commercial cultural production; a scrutiny that can bring to light [...] the interdependence and relations of reciprocal effect between cultural and economic practices.<sup>32</sup>

For the design historian the analysis of the 'textured interplay' that surrounded the designer and the designed object and the manner in which products were brought to the consumer's attention is a fruitful approach. This is particularly insightful in the context of a designer-collaboration such as the Incorporated Society with its stated aims to raise the profile and prestige of Britain's broader fashion and textile industry.

In many ways, a focus on this area of negotiation, situated between production and consumption, aligns this study not only with those that consider intermediaries but also with the methodological turn proposed by a number of design historians, which considers the mediation processes that surround design.<sup>33</sup> In 2009, Grace Lees-Maffei, went so far as to identify mediation as the 'third stream' in Design History, and persuasively argued that:

An emphasis on consumption has both enjoyed a period of prominence and been a continuing aspect of the design historical project. To study designers tells only one side of the story, but to study consumers can

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<sup>31</sup> Lou Taylor's work into the marketing practices of Parisian houses has shown that there are many less quantitative forms of information to indicate how couture houses operated, see Lou Taylor, 'The Hilfiger Factor and the Flexible Commercial World of Couture', in *The Fashion Business: Theory, Practice and Image*, edited by Nicola White, and Ian Griffiths (Berg, 2000)

<sup>32</sup> Sean Nixon and Paul Du Gay, 'Who Needs Cultural Intermediaries?' *Cultural Studies*, Volume 16, Number 4, 2002, pp. 495-500

<sup>33</sup> John Heskett, *Industrial Design* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), pp. 112 -113, John A. Walker, *Design History and the History of Design*, (Pluto Press, 1990), p. 27, 70, & 174 – 185, Grace Lees Maffei, 'Studying Advice: Historiography, Methodology, Commentary, Bibliography', *Journal of Design History*, Volume 16, Issue 1, 2003, p. 3

equally run the risk of privileging one dimension. Design history is sufficiently flexible to accommodate a range of approaches and interests, so that studies that begin with the designer or the manufacturer as a focal point co-exist with those that ask questions about users and studies that are interested in production and consumption and their interface through processes of mediation.<sup>34</sup>

The study of mediation is therefore an examination of 'that which exists between production and consumption, and seeing these phenomena as being fundamentally important in inscribing meanings for objects'.<sup>35</sup> The main current within this methodology has been an emphasis that continues the 'consumption turn' within Design History by exploring the role of channels such as 'television, magazines, corporate literature, advice literature and so on in mediating between producers and consumers, forming consumption practices and ideas about design'.<sup>36</sup> As Kjetil Fallan has pointed out 'studying mediation is a fertile strategy for better understanding the negotiations not only between production and consumption, but also between ideology and pragmatism, between theory and practice'.<sup>37</sup>

Whilst not to deny the benefits of a focus on the consumption of couture clothing (so clearly demonstrated in Alexandra Palmer's exemplary study of the retail and consumption of European couture in Toronto) this study responds to Jeffrey Meikle's claim that historians 'have no way of knowing with certainty how and why consumers at a given historical moment responded to particular products'.<sup>38</sup> It therefore sets out to understand the mediated narrative that surrounded the designers of the Incorporated Society which responds to Fallan's assertion, that for the design historian, 'empirical studies of historic use and consumption are probably better conducted by going after the imagined user or the represented user'.<sup>39</sup>

The parameters of this enquiry are therefore restricted to an exploration of the business strategies and mediation of the London couturiers at the point of collaboration:

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<sup>34</sup> Grace Lees-Maffei, 'The Production – Consumption – Mediation Paradigm', *Journal of Design History* Vol. 22 No. 4, 2009, pp. 351 - 376

<sup>35</sup> Both Lees-Maffei and Fallan have cited my previous publications on BBC Television as representative of this directional focus in design history. See Michelle Jones, 'Design and the Domestic Persuader: Television and the British Broadcasting Corporation's promotion of post war 'good design' *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 16, Issue 4, 2003, pp. 307 – 318, and 'Design in the Monochrome Box: the BBC Television design department and the modern style, 1946 – 1962, in Christopher Frayling & Emily King, *Design and Popular Entertainment*, (Manchester University Press, 2009), pp. 161 - 179

<sup>36</sup> Lees-Maffei, 2009, pp. 351 - 376

<sup>37</sup> Kjetil Fallan, *Design History: Understanding Theory and Method* (Berg, 2010), p.18

<sup>38</sup> Jeffrey L. Meikle, 'Material Virtues: On the Ideal and the Real in Design History', *Journal of Design History*, Volume 11, Number 3, 1998, p. 194. Alexandra Palmer, *Couture and Commerce: The Transatlantic Fashion Trade in the 1950s* (University of British Columbia Press, 2004)

<sup>39</sup> Fallan, 2010, p. 98

not only in newspapers and magazines, films and theatre productions, but most importantly, in its collective showcases. When reading the mediation of the Incorporated Society, the focus moves to the process involved in the construction of a specific narrative that surrounded and gave meaning to the representation of the London couturiers' work. Although the British colonies and dominions, alongside Europe and Latin America, were export markets for the Incorporated Society's designers, this study focuses on the London couturiers' specific appeal to the North American market. Whilst not wishing to deny the wider global distribution network of London couture, this restriction is dictated by the importance of the lucrative US dollar market for British trade policy and European couture production throughout the period under consideration.<sup>40</sup> This focus also aligns with a main contention drawn from the research that shows that the identity of the London couture industry was in many ways a reaction to the commercial dictates of the North American market and the pioneering role it played in the democratization of fashion. This study therefore recognises that within the framework of a design group focused on export to the US and the development of prestige for the overall industry, the members of the Incorporated Society had to create an international vision for British fashion that was simultaneously inward and outward looking in its construction.<sup>41</sup>

As practitioners of an elite form of fashion production the Incorporated Society's members never advertised in the traditional sense, but operated through a subtle manipulation of a system of representation offered by a particular national network. This study therefore considers the narratives that surrounded the Incorporated Society, as an example of business strategies constructed in response to both internal and external markets, which relied on a specific discourse of national identity and character.<sup>42</sup> This

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<sup>40</sup> Alex Cairncross, *The British Economy since 1945* (London: Wiley Blackwell, 1995), B. W. E. Alford, *British Economic Performance 1945 – 1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) *Exports to Canada: Report to the President of the Board of Trade of the United Kingdom Clothing Mission* (His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1949). For the importance of the American market for French couture see Marlis Schweitzer, 'American Fashions for American Women: The Rise and Fall of Fashion Nationalism', in *Producing Fashion: Commerce, Culture and Consumers*, edited by Regina Blaszczyk (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), pp. 130 – 149

<sup>41</sup> It is often the constant comparison to France, America and Italy that has defined London's boundaries as a fashion centre, particularly the products and structure of its couture industry, see for example, Bettina Ballard, *In My Fashion* (C. Tingling & Co. Ltd.), 1960, Colin McDowell, *Forties Fashion and the New Look* (Bloomsbury, 1997), Claire Wilcox, *The Golden Age of Couture: Paris and London 1947 – 57* (London: V & A Publishing, 2007), Christopher Breward, *Fashioning London: Clothing and the Modern Metropolis* (Berg, 2004)

<sup>42</sup> This approach aligns with recent consideration of the national implication of other couture groups see Valerie Pouillard, 'In the Shadow of Paris? French Haute Couture and Belgian Fashion Between the wars,' in Blaszczyk (2008), pp. 62 – 81, this article focuses on the Belgian Syndicate Chamber of Haute Couture. Also see Alexandra Palmer, 'The Association of Canadian Couturiers', in *Fashion a Canadian Perspective*,

approach is timely as it positions the research alongside a burgeoning academic focus on the implications of national identity within the international fashion industry and in particular the power structures of fashion world cities.<sup>43</sup> Today, the idea of a 'world fashion city' or 'fashion capital' is a familiar one that refers to London, Paris, New York and Milan: the sites where twice-yearly, 'the travelling circus of the controlling elites of fashion culture' bring global media attention to the collections of internationally-recognised designer brands.<sup>44</sup> In the 2006 anthology *Fashion World Cities* the urban geographer David Gilbert pointed out that, 'despite the widespread use of the term 'fashion capital' in academic work as well as in the fashion press, it [had previously] attracted little serious consideration'.<sup>45</sup> The conference papers used within this book positioned the understanding of fashion cities within wider structures not only of local cultural and industrial phenomena but also global aspects of imperialism and capitalism. This highlighted the importance of 'a long-established popular understanding of a certain urban hierarchy within the global status of fashion world cities'.<sup>46</sup> This study examines the construction of this hierarchy and the role the small-scale couture played within the recognition of London as a centre for the production of original fashion design. It should

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edited by Alexandra Palmer (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp. 90 – 109. An important text is also Agnes Rocamora's *Fashioning the City: Paris, Fashion and the Media* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), which demonstrates how the representation of Paris in the fashion press naturalized that city's claim to fashion authority, particularly as embodied in the fashionable feminine symbol of the Parisienne.

<sup>43</sup> *Fashion World Cities*, edited by Christopher Breward and David Gilbert (Oxford: Berg, 2006), Nicola White, *Reconstructing Italian Fashion* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), Valerie Steele, *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Berg, 1988), Christopher Breward, *Fashioning London: Clothing and the Modern Metropolis* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), *The Englishness of English Dress*, edited by Breward, Conekin and Cox (Oxford: Berg, 2002), Rebecca Arnold, *The American Look: Fashion, Sportswear and the Image of Women in the 1930s and 1940s* (New York, I.B. Tauris, 2009), Christopher Breward, *The London Look: Fashion from Street to Catwalk* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2004), Alison Goodrum, *The National Fabric: Fashion, Britishness, Globalisation* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), Alexandra Palmer, *Fashion a Canadian Perspective* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), Dominique Veillon and Miriam Kochan, *Fashion Under the Occupation* (Oxford: Berg 2002), Irene Guenther, *Nazi Chic: Fashioning Women in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), Eugenia Paulicelli, *Fashion Under Fascism: Beyond the Black Shirt* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), Agnes Rocamora, *Fashioning the City: Paris, Fashion and the Media* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), Norma Rantisi, 'The Prospects and Perils of Creating a Viable Fashion Identity,' *Fashion Theory*, Volume 15, Issue 2, pp. 259 – 266

<sup>44</sup> David Gilbert, 'From Paris to Shanghai: The Changing Geographies of Fashion's World Cities,' in *Fashion's World Cities*, edited by Christopher Breward and David Gilbert (Oxford: Berg, 2006) pp. 3 – 32, (14)

<sup>45</sup> Gilbert, 2006, pp. 3 – 32

<sup>46</sup> Gilbert, 2006, pp. 3 – 32 (4) see also, C. Breward's, *Fashioning London: Clothing and the Modern Metropolis* (Oxford: Berg, 2004) and 'Fashion's Front and Back: "Rag trade" Cultures and Cultures of Consumption in Post-war London c. 1945–1970,' *The London Journal*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2006, pp. 15-40. D. Gilbert, 'The Youngest Legend in History': Cultures of Consumption and the Mythologies of Swinging London,' *The London Journal*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2006, pp. 1-14. Andrew Godley, *Jewish Immigrant Entrepreneurship in New York and London, 1880-1914: Enterprise and Culture* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2001) and 'The Development of the UK Clothing Industry, 1850–1950: Output and Productivity Growth,' *Business History*, Vol. 37, No. 4, 1995, pp. 46-63 and Andrew Godley, Anne Kershen, Raphael Schapiro, 'Fashion and Its Impact on the Economic Development of London's East End Womenswear Industry, 1929–62: The Case of Ellis and Goldstein,' *Textile History*, Vol. 34, No. 2, 2003, pp. 214-228



also be noted that it addresses the construction of a fashion centre, rather than a fashion capital or city. This is because the latter is a product of post-industrial concerns that reflect the late twentieth century development of the fashion trade as a central component within the global branding industry.<sup>47</sup> In the timeframe under consideration, a fashion centre was based firmly in its production capacity, whereby it was a 'centre' of not only designer activity and authority but also of manufacture and production.

As part of the turn towards mediation, the consideration of the construction of narratives around cultural forms has recently begun to enter design studies. This is demonstrated by the Parson's New School of Design's, March 2014 symposium *Narratives and Design Studies: A Task of Translation*.<sup>48</sup> In its aim to 'identify some of the major plot lines that run through design and how they are being reinterpreted today', it illustrated the fruitfulness of considering design not only as object but as part of a cultural and industrial story. In terms of the consideration of the impact of networks on the narratives constructed around design, an influential essay from 2006, which preempts this recent interest, is the business historian Per Hansen's work, which explores 'Danish Modern' furniture design through a narrative methodology.<sup>49</sup> Hansen considers the impact of a network of tastemakers on that particular design industry. He argues that this form of Danish design succeeded for two reasons; firstly through creating powerful narratives that framed consumer understanding and the way they made sense of Danish furniture. Secondly, through the development of a network of individuals and organisations (professional tastemakers) who promoted and legitimised these narratives. Hansen's article is particularly pertinent as it offers a different understanding of what constitutes a tastemaker in terms of design, which is separate from Blaszczyk's reading of 'fashion intermediaries' and of the design historical discourse of the Council of Industrial Design and the English proselytisers of 'good

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<sup>47</sup> See for example, Teri Agins, *The End of Fashion: The Mass Marketing of the Clothing Business* (New York: Diane Publishing, 1999), Norma Rantisi, 'The Ascendance of New York Fashion', *The International Journal of Urban and Regional Affairs*, Number 28, 2004, pp. 86 – 106. Norma Rantisi, 'The Prospects and Perils of Creating a Viable Fashion Identity' *Fashion Theory*, Volume 15, Issue 2, pp. 259 – 266, Lou Taylor, 'The Hilfiger Factor and the Flexible Commercial World of Couture', in *The Fashion Business: Theory, Practice and Image* edited by Nicola White and Ian Griffiths (Oxford: Berg, 2000)

<sup>48</sup> This was an interdisciplinary symposium with scholars and practitioners from literature, design, architecture, digital technology, engineering, sociology, urbanism, and social entrepreneurship. Papers were delivered in four different strands - *Narratives of History*: Clive Dilnot (Professor of Design Studies) and Peter Hall (Design writer). *Narrating Place*: Phillip Lopate (Film Critic). *Narratives of Design and Gender*: Liz Collins (Artist & Designer) Hazel Clark (Research Chair of Fashion), Elizabeth Guffey (Professor of Art History), Jenny Sabin (Experimental Architecture and Design). *Narratives of Agency*: Lara Penin, (Transdisciplinary Design) Elzbieta Matynia (Professor of Sociology).

<sup>49</sup> Per H. Hansen, 'Networks, Narratives, and New Markets: The Rise and Decline of Danish Modern Furniture Design, 1930 – 1970', *Business History Review* 80, Harvard Business School, Autumn 2006, pp. 449 – 483

design'. It sees tastemaking as a wider practice of networks that construct a cohesive narrative around a range of goods, which is a similar understanding to that of Lenora Auslander's analysis of the complexities of the work of 'taste professionals' that emerged in the nineteenth century in the French furniture industry.<sup>50</sup> In defense of this approach Hansen states that it is:

Increasingly relevant to business history as marketing and branding assume growing importance in the activities of global and local companies and as they try to attract the attention of consumers by telling stories that correspond with, and contribute to, consumer's perceived identities and lifestyles. Business historians [...] should shift their perspective from merely understanding the wants and needs of consumers to exploring the construction of meaning and identity.<sup>51</sup>

Hansen's appeal for the consideration of narratives, particularly those that surround nationally specific design forms, is particularly relevant for an analysis of the Incorporated Society. This couturier-collaboration needed to construct a clearly understood concept of English fashion design, so that certain meanings were assigned to it, to cause consumers, at both a national and international level, to prefer garments designed and produced in Britain. The Incorporated Society acted as a vehicle the London couturiers could use not only to support their design identity but also to validate their practice; membership positioned these elite dress designers above other fashion producers. This study will question the benefits this collaborative identity brought to the designers and the extent to which it legitimised their practice and facilitated, framed and reinforced links to other individuals and organisations. The examination of the mediated narrative constructed around the Incorporated Society will also consider to what extent this was formulated by the designers themselves, or whether it corresponded more readily with the needs of a hidden network of producers, organisations and institutions.

### Literature Review

There is an obvious gap within the historical documentation and consideration of the British fashion industry in the 1930s and 1940s that offers clear scope for a new contribution to the discipline of Design History. That London developed, and indeed maintained a couture industry for over forty years has been afforded only little recognition. London's rise to prominence as a world fashion city has often been

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<sup>50</sup> Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Berkeley: Los Angeles: London, University of California, 1996)

<sup>51</sup> Hansen, 2006, p. 483

positioned within the 1960s and attributed to the creativity that emanated from Britain's art-schools and its distinctive youth styles. However, the success of British couturiers, in comparison to many subsequent art-school trained designers, should not be disregarded.

Unlike many of their French counterparts the London couturiers of this time have received only limited acknowledgement. For example, of the Incorporated Society's seventeen members, only Norman Hartnell and Hardy Amies the 'royal-couturiers' have received solo monographs and museum exhibitions.<sup>52</sup> The marginalisation of London-based couture and lack of sustained research into this topic is undoubtedly explained by both the size and market supremacy of the Parisian couture industry.<sup>53</sup> London's made-to-measure female clothing is primarily depicted as a small-scale parody of its French predecessor, in comparison to the bespoke male tailoring traditions of Savile Row, which are accorded respect and acknowledged as distinctively British.<sup>54</sup> For the fashion historian Christopher Breward, in his brief assessment, the Incorporated Society represented merely 'the synthetic drafting of Parisian style onto the London scene'.<sup>55</sup> In both contemporaneous and retrospective acknowledgement, London's couturiers are described as mimics of their French counterparts, for example Stiebel has been declared London's Balmain and Michael Donnelly its Balenciaga.<sup>56</sup> Such comparisons illustrate the disparity between the couture industries in the two cities. Giles Lipovetsky has

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<sup>52</sup> 'Hartnell: Clothes by the Royal Couturier, 1930s – 60s', 28 March 1985 to 2 February 1986, Museum of Costume Bath, with an accompanying exhibition catalogue *Norman Hartnell, 1901 – 79*, The Royal Pavilion Art Gallery and Museums, Brighton, 1985. Michael Pick, *Bedazzled: Norman Hartnell, Sixty Years of Glamour and Fashion* (Pointed Leaf Press, 2009), Michael Pick, *Hardy Amies* (Suffolk: Antique Collectors Club Editions, 2012), Hartnell to Amies: Couture by Royal Appointment, curated by Dennis Northdruff and Michael Pick, Fashion and Textile Museum, London, 16 November 2012 – 23 February 2013. In the past three years Hardy Amies' reopened salon in Savile Row now has in-house exhibitions and has employed a company curator who has produced: 'Sir Hardy Amies: A Century of Couture' in October 2009 and 'Wedding Dresses' in 2011.

<sup>53</sup> For example Francois Baudot, *A Century of Fashion* (Thames and Hudson, 1999) This text whilst documenting C20th fashion makes no mention of London's couture industry and only mentions English fashion design from 1960 onwards. Charlotte Seeling, *Fashion: The Century of the Designer, 1900 – 1999* (Koneman, 1999) includes a section on 'British Fashion' which only considers the post-war period, it has two pages on Norman Hartnell and Hardy Amies which focus on their role as 'royal couturiers' all the other British designers mentioned practiced post-1970.

<sup>54</sup> Richard Walker, *The Savile Row Story: An Illustrated History* (Prion Books, 1988), D.W. Gieve, *Gieves & Hawkes: No 1 Savile Row, London, 1785-1985* (Gieves & Hawkes, 1985), Stephen Howarth, *Henry Poole: Founders of Savile Row: The Making of a Legend* (Bene Factum Publishing 2003), James B. Sherwood, *The London Cut: Savile Row Bespoke Tailoring* (Marsilio, 2007), Richard Anderson, *Bespoke: Savile Row Ripped and Smoothed* (Simon & Schuster Ltd., 2009), James Sherwood and Tom Ford, *Savile Row: The Master Tailors of British Bespoke* (Thames and Hudson, 2010), Carter, *Anderson and Sheppard: A Style is Born*, edited by Graydon Carter and Cullen Murphy (Quercus Publishing, 2011)

<sup>55</sup> Christopher Breward, *Fashioning London: Clothing the Modern Metropolis* (Oxford: Berg, 2004) p.126

<sup>56</sup> For the comparison of Stiebel to Balmain see, 'Designer on the Move' *Rhodesia Herald*, 24 December 1957 and Micheal to Balenciaga see *The Golden Age of Couture: Paris and London 1947 – 1957*, edited by Claire Wilcox (London: V & A Publishing, 2007)

argued that the notion of individuality, differentiation and novelty and the designer as the instigator and conduit of these elements is a key part of the discourse of fashion.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, if fashion is understood as representative of a designer's individual creative agency the consistent suggestion of a mimetic relationship can be seen to have undermined the worthiness and relevance of the British couture industry to both fashion and Design History.

The documentation of the London couturiers has however focused on the members of the Incorporated Society, particularly in the 1950s, which points to the importance of this couturier-collaboration within the historiography of British fashion design. Within museum exhibitions the recognition of London couture is often fitted into a constructed understanding of British fashion, that sees it based alternatively on the traditions of male tailoring or those of rebellion and subversion.<sup>58</sup> At both an academic and popular level, it is the anti-establishment practices of London-based designers from the 1960s onwards that have received focused study.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, in much academic enquiry the notion of rebellion has been solidified by the focus on non-elite practices of British fashion consumption within its idiosyncratic street and sub-cultural style.<sup>60</sup> For example, this understanding of London's design heritage as 'a guardian of the bespoke and the edgy' informed the Museum of London's 2005 exhibition entitled *The London Look: From Street to Catwalk*.<sup>61</sup> The idea of what constituted the 'London Look' was structured around four categories: tradition, innovation, the alternative and the stylistic

<sup>57</sup> Giles Lipovetsky (translated by Catherine Porter) *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994)

<sup>58</sup> Amy De la Haye, *The Cutting Edge: 50 years of British fashion 1947 - 1997* (London: V & A Publications, 1998) This text's thematic structuring of post war British fashion, presents it under four headings: tailoring, romantic, bohemian and country. See also Catherine McDermott, *Made in Britain: Tradition and Style in Contemporary British Fashion* (London: Mitchell Beazley, 2002) The headings in this text are British Tailoring, Traditional Fabric and Rebellion & Subversion, Andrew Bolton, and Harold Koda, *Anglomaniac: Tradition and Transgression in British Fashion* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2007)

<sup>59</sup> De la Haye, 1998, p.18. See for example: Judith Watt, *Ossie Clark 1965 - 74* (London: V & A Publications, 2003), Ian R. Webb, *Foale and Tuffin: The Sixties a Decade of Fashion* (ACC Editions, 2009), Richard Lester and Marit Allen, *John Bates Fashion Designer* (Antique Collectors Club Ltd., 2008), Sindy Stemp and Felicity Green, *Jean Muir: Beyond Fashion* (Antique Collectors Club Ltd., 2006), Alwyn Turner, *Biba: The Biba Experience* (Antique Collectors Club Ltd, 2007), Shawn Levy, *Ready Steady Go: Swinging London and the Invention of Cool* (Fourth Estate, 2003), Christopher Breward David Gilbert and Jenny Lister, *Swinging Sixties* (London: V & A Publications, 2006), Claire Wilcox, *Vivienne Westwood* (London: V & A Publications, 2005)

<sup>60</sup> For the celebration of British street and subcultural style see for example, the V & A's Street style exhibition 1994 curated by Ted Polhemus and Amy De la Haye, and Ted Polhemus, *Streetstyle* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994) or Caroline Evans, 'Street Style, Subculture and Subversion', *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society*, Number 31, 1997, pp.105 - 110. For the seminal study of British subcultural style see Dick Hebdige, *Subculture the Meaning of Style* (Routledge, 1979). For a critique of the mythologizing of British street style see Sophie Woodward, 'The Myth of Street Style', *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 13 Issue 1, 2009, pp. 83 - 102

<sup>61</sup> Christopher Breward, Edwina Ehrman and Caroline Evans, *The London Look: Fashion from Street to Catwalk* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2004), pp.5

fusion in fashionable dress. As such, the garments by London's couturiers, which were all drawn from members of the Incorporated Society were used as an example of tradition. Similarly in 2006, London's Victoria and Albert museum held an exhibition entitled *Swinging Sixties*, where again members of the Society's work was prominently positioned in its first display case under the heading 'Established Traditions'.<sup>62</sup> In both the *London Look* and the *Swinging Sixties* exhibitions, because the focus was on London's fully established couture industry of the 1950s, the curators used the Incorporated Society as an example of conservative practice against which the iconoclastic rebellion of young designers in the 1960s could be made clear. The construction of this narrative of conservatism has however never been considered as one that emerged as a consequence of the London couture industry's evolution in a period of economic and political upheaval.

It was only in the *Swinging Sixties* exhibition catalogue that Christopher Breward, one of the curators, put forward an interesting re-assessment of the Society in his assertion that fashion production at this point was a continuation of the previous practices of London couture rather than a complete break with the past. In an analysis of garment construction he claimed that there were:

As many connections between [Mary] Quant's work and the work of a preceding generation of designers (who collectively formed the Inc. Soc.) as there are differences. For example the pioneering experimentation with fastenings and economical use of construction elements that characterised Inc Soc's output during the wartime Utility scheme pre-empted Quant's use of similar motifs by several years.<sup>63</sup>

Whilst this connection is questionable (as it ignores the involvement of mass manufacturers in the production of the Utility Scheme couture prototypes), this revisionist assessment correlates with directions taken within Design History, which challenge previous understandings of design change as a series of breaks with the past. It responds to what John Heskett has termed the 'layering theory of design,' which acknowledges that 'the new has never entirely replaced the old' within the production and consumption of design but has 'instead been layered upon it'.<sup>64</sup> This thesis in

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<sup>62</sup> Curated by Christopher Breward, David Gilbert and Jenny Lister this exhibition was completed as part of the ESRC/AHRC 'Cultures of Consumption' Programme, 6 June 2006 – 25 February 2007

<sup>63</sup> Breward, Gilbert, and Lister, 2006, p.15, this is an interesting re-assessment but it ignores the involvement of mass-manufacturers' in the creation of the Utility models, as Chapter 3 will make clear.

<sup>64</sup> John Heskett, *Some Lessons of Design History*, in Designkompetanse – Utvikling, Forskning og Undervisning edited by A. Skjerven (Oslo National Academy of the Arts, 2005)

correspondence with this approach, which sees design as simultaneously about adaptation, continuity and change, will explore the previously ignored role couturier-collaboration played in the recognition of London as a fashion centre. It will question whether the rise of London and its designers in the 'Swinging Sixties', rather than an inauguration, should be seen as a legacy of the activity of a previous generation of London fashion designers. This challenges Breward and Gilbert's assertions in their anthology *Fashion's World Cities*, which claimed that the 1960s was the period 'during which the British capital took its place alongside Paris as a world fashion city' and that the first London Fashion weeks were organized in 1958.<sup>65</sup> Whilst recognising that their scholarship was based on different criteria for fashion's operation, primarily at a mass-market level, this study will demonstrate that such an understanding is incorrect.<sup>66</sup>

Within fashion history, as well as being seen in a limited position next to a later generation of British designers, the London couturiers are always given secondary consideration to their Parisian counterparts. In many ways however, the *Golden Age of Couture: Paris and London 1947 - 1957* exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2007 rescued the Incorporated Society designers from obscurity and challenged the assertion of their alleged mimicry of Parisian practitioners. Yet, within the exhibition's comparative framework the understanding of the power structure between the two fashion centres and Paris' discernible supremacy naturally undermined the creative agency of the London-based couturiers.<sup>67</sup> This exhibition's catalogue included a detailed survey of the Incorporated Society by Amy de la Haye 'Material Evidence London Couture 1947 – 57' based on an analysis of its tailored clothing in the museum's holdings. De la Haye has produced the most consistent research into the group, setting out many of its key achievements and has presented valuable analysis of the surviving garments and evidence.<sup>68</sup> Prior to this catalogue entry the Incorporated Society, as a specific topic of research, had been the focus of only one other article, for *Costume: The*

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<sup>65</sup> *Fashion's World Cities*, edited by Christopher Breward and David Gilbert (Oxford: Berg, 2006) p. x. & p. 25

<sup>66</sup> For example, my research has shown that the first government-sponsored fashion weeks began ten years earlier in 1948.

<sup>67</sup> This exhibition was initially going to focus on only Christian Dior, yet funding and the museum's holding of couture from that period could not sustain a large exhibition of this type. It therefore utilised the many garments gathered by Cecil Beaton for his exhibition *Fashion: an anthology* in 1971, many of which were examples by the London couturiers. Claire Wilcox, *Unravelling Couture Culture Conference*, Victoria and Albert Museum, 16 & 17 November 2007

<sup>68</sup> Amy De la Haye, 'Material Evidence London Couture 1947 – 57', in *The Golden Age of Couture: Paris and London 1947 – 1957*, edited by Claire Wilcox (London: V & A Publishing, 2007), pp. 89 – 107

*Journal of the Costume Society*.<sup>69</sup> Written by Gavin Waddell, this was primarily a summary of the Society's minutes. These were used as an informative source for setting out a clear chronology of the couturiers' post-war activity; however, the article did not go beyond description.

There are two recently completed doctoral projects on Norman Hartnell and Guiseppi Mattli that rescue these specific designers from obscurity, yet they both concentrate on the individual rather than the collective.<sup>70</sup> The careers of Victor Stiebel and Hardy Amies have also been considered in two essays in an anthology on English dress.<sup>71</sup> Within the titles of these essays that considered 'the Englishness of English dress' the understood narrative of traditional practice was reinforced by their focus on the 1950s onwards and through their reference to romantic gowns, impeccable tweeds and royal connections.<sup>72</sup> Whilst such work offers broader insights into socio-cultural and industrial concerns the focus on autonomous practice continues to reinforce the idea of couture as individual creativity rather than a result of the networks and narratives that support and define it.

These studies are insightful and point to interesting developments in how the London couturiers are being considered. Particularly useful are Edwina Ehrman's text which focuses on Hardy Amies as an 'international businessman' and Jane Hattrick's work which looks at Norman Hartnell's 'issues of design and business'. These both align the Incorporated Society designers with more focused academic studies being undertaken into French couture. The most relevant work in this field has placed distinct cultural activities in proximity to expose business strategies within the fashion industry. For example, the cultural historian Mary Stewart's *Dressing Modern French Women: Marketing Haute Couture 1919 – 1939*, focused on competitive marketing that privileged

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<sup>69</sup> Gavin Waddell, 'The Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers: Its Impact on Post-War British Fashion', *Costume: the Journal of the Costume society*, Number 35, 2001, pp. 92-115

<sup>70</sup> Jane Hattrick, *The Life and Work of the London Couturier Norman Hartnell: Issues of Design, Business, Royal Patronage and Consumption 1924 – 1979* (University of Brighton, PhD Thesis, 2012) Caroline Ness, Famous, Forgotten, Found: *rediscovering the career of London couture fashion designer Guiseppi (Jo) Mattli 1934 - 1980* (University of Glasgow, PhD Thesis, 2014)

<sup>71</sup> Edwina Ehrman, 'The Spirit of English Style: Hardy Amies, Royal Dressmaker and International Businessman' and Amy de la Haye, 'Gilded Brocade Gowns and Impeccable Tailored Tweeds: Victor Stiebel (1907 – 76) a Quintessentially English Designer' in *The Englishness of English Dress*, edited by Christopher Breward, Becky Conekin, and Caroline Cox (Oxford: Berg, 2002), pp. 133 – 146 & pp. 147 – 160

<sup>72</sup> These last two references have been reinforced by two of the London couturiers production of texts on the history of royal dress and English men's suits: Norman Hartnell, *Royal Courts of Fashion* (London: Littlehampton Books Services Ltd. 1971), Hardy Amies, *The Englishman's Suit: A Personal View* (London: Quartet Books, 1994)

national identity at the high end of the clothing industry.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, the art historian Nancy Troy's influential study *Couture Culture: A Study in Modern Art and Fashion*, which examines the commercial practices of Paul Poiret, has exposed how the visual and performing arts were used in the construction of the cultural position of French couture.<sup>74</sup> These kind of studies, which consider not just the historical specificity of clothing in terms of modes of production and distribution but also the discursive formation of fashion and the cultural discourses that surround it have become more common as the fields of fashion and design history are increasingly informed by one another and by the interdisciplinary study of visual culture more generally.<sup>75</sup>

The wider industrial and cultural implications of the Incorporated Society's work have however rarely been considered. A note-worthy exception in terms of design historical consideration is Helen Reynolds essay, which includes the Society in its consideration of '*The Utility Garment: Its Design and the Effect on the Mass-Market 1942 – 45*'.<sup>76</sup> There are also two further articles by Anthea Jarvis '*British Cotton Couture: British Fashion and the Cotton Board, 1941 – 1969*' and Rosemary Harden '*Margot Fonteyn and Fashion Designers in the 1940s*' which both draw on museum holdings of clothing the Society produced respectively for the Cotton Board and the British prima ballerina Margot Fonteyn.<sup>77</sup> These offer indications of the range of activity that supported the dissemination of English couture, yet do not analyse it in relation to the operation of the Incorporated Society. In terms of the recognition of the importance of the London couturiers within the export market in the 1950s, an academic exemplar is Alexandra Palmer's *Couture and Commerce: The Transatlantic Fashion Trade in the 1950s*, which demonstrates the fruitfulness of exploring couture within design and socio-cultural history and the benefit of a methodology based on material culture.<sup>78</sup> It reveals the multi-faceted use of couture as a symbol of Canadian women's post-war identity and has

<sup>73</sup> Mary Lynn Stewart, *Dressing Modern French Women: Marketing Haute Couture 1919 – 1939* (John Hopkins University Press, 2008)

<sup>74</sup> Nancy Troy, *Couture Culture: A Study in Modern Art and Fashion* (MIT Press, 2004)

<sup>75</sup> See for example Mary L. Stewart, 2008, Arnold, 2009 and Rocamora, 2009

<sup>76</sup> Helen Reynolds, 'The Utility Garment: Its Design and the Effect on the Mass-Market 1942-45', in *Utility Reassessed*, edited by Judy Attfield (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 125-142

<sup>77</sup> Anthea Jarvis, 'British Cotton Couture: British Fashion and the Cotton Board, 1941 – 1969', *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society*, Number 31, 1997, pp.92 – 99, David Tomlinson, *British Cotton Couture 1941 – 1961*, catalogue to exhibition held at Gallery of English Costume, Platt Hall, Manchester, 1985, Rosemary Harden, 'Margot Fonteyn and Fashion Designers in the 1940s', *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society*, Number 44, 2010. The garments commissioned by the Cotton Board were also the focus of an exhibition in 1985 where they were presented as a celebration of the 'unique dressmaking and tailoring skills of the time,' see Tomlinson (1985), p. 2

<sup>78</sup> Alexandra Palmer, *Couture and Commerce: The Transatlantic Fashion Trade in the 1950s* (University of British Columbia Press, 2004) and Alexandra Palmer 'Inside Paris Haute Couture' in Wilcox (2007), pp. 63 – 83



much to say about the colonial consumption of the products of the London couturiers. Interestingly, her research points to the limited differentiation in the Canadian market's consumption of the couture garments that emanated from Paris and London. While a number of sources have looked at specific aspect of the Incorporated Society's work, or at individual designers, noone has yet done an integrated study of the London couture for the period leading up to and immediately following the Society's formation. This study's focus on designer collaboration between 1930 and 1950 therefore contributes to a wider understanding of the networks of support offered to British design and creative practice during a particularly unstable economic period.

### Sources

The obscurity of the material and documentary evidence that remains on the Incorporated Society can to a certain extent explain the lack of sustained research into the business practices of the London couturiers. The way that material found its way into repositories has been precarious and limited. For example, the minutes of the Incorporated Society's meetings were discovered only when the Old Bond Street shop of Rayne Shoes was demolished in 1987 and a builder rescued them from a skip and contacted the Victoria and Albert Museum to see if they had any historical value.<sup>79</sup> Similarly, the designs, photographs and press books of Victor Stiebel were discovered in a garage by a solicitor when his former partner died.<sup>80</sup> None of the society's members left behind extensive business records; only the customer account books of the House of Lachasse survive.<sup>81</sup> The lack of documentation is compounded by the fact that only three of the London couturiers published autobiographies of their careers.<sup>82</sup> In comparison to those written by the Parisian designers these are particularly self-deprecating. However these documents are still self-censored promotional texts and do not act as true accounts of their business practices and collaborations but rather their personal achievements and cultural associations. It was therefore my discovery of Stiebel's unpublished and uncensored memoirs that was particularly insightful. Through an extensive process of empirical research many archives were also found to retain rich veins of historically significant material. Large amounts of information on this trade group

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<sup>79</sup> This information is taken from conversation with Amy de la Haye, 2007. The minutes were at Rayne Shoes, because the owner Edward Rayne was the last Chairman of the Incorporated Society.

<sup>80</sup> This information is taken from interview with Adrian Woodhouse, February 2009.

<sup>81</sup> These are held at the Victoria and Albert Museum's Archive of Art Design, London (AAD/1989/6)

<sup>82</sup> Charles Creed, *Maid to Measure* (London: Jarrolds, 1961), Norman Hartnell, *Silver and Gold* (London: Evans Brothers, 1955), Hardy Amies, *Just So Far* (London: Collins, 1954) and Hardy Amies, *Still Here: An Autobiography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985)

were uncovered, much of which has not, until now, been brought into thorough analysis. Whilst business records are limited, the direction of the research and analysis, which focused on the mediation and narratives that surround designer collaboration was helped by the survival, in both public and private holdings, of the personal press-cutting books created by seven of the Incorporated Society designers.<sup>83</sup> As some of these books were conscientiously kept over a forty-year period, they are invaluable primary sources and interesting objects in their own right. They emphasize both the importance of media recognition to the designers themselves and preserve comprehensive evidence of the London couturiers' mediation through a range of both national and international newspapers, trade publications and magazines.<sup>84</sup>

The Alison Settle Archive (held at the Design Council Archive, University of Brighton) was also another important source for the documentation of the changes in the British fashion and textile industry, as was the archive of the *Ambassador Magazine* (held at the Archive of Art and Design, Victoria and Albert Museum, London). In order to consider the industrial perspective, particular attention was paid to reports from the trade journals *Draper's Record* for the British market and *Women's Wear Daily* for the American. To place this fragmentary material in context a systematic analysis was undertaken of the British edition of *Vogue* magazine. *Vogue* was a particularly relevant source, not only because it was highly influential within the international mediation of high fashion in this period but also because of its links to the formation of the Incorporated Society suggested by its business manager's creation of its Constitution. Throughout the thesis, when newspapers and particularly magazines with international editions such as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* are cited they will always refer to the British versions, unless otherwise stated.

The nature of the design historical questions that surround the Society also required a much wider variety of empirical source material. Alongside the magazine, press and trade reports and surviving examples of the designers' material output and its visual representation, evidence is taken from documentary sources such as individual autobiographies and diaries of the designers, their clients and their industrial and

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<sup>83</sup> The analysis of the extensive press books of six of the Society's designers demonstrates similarities in the way they preserved every mention they received, however slight. The press books consulted belonged to Digby Morton, Michael Sherard, Hardy Amies, Mattli, Victor Stiebel, Angele Delanghe and Ronald Patterson. The analysis of Frederick Starke (member of the Model House Group) was also extremely informative.

<sup>84</sup> For future reference: due to the nature of these press books the footnotes throughout the thesis to material taken from these sources do not always include the page number as often only the title and date of the publication was documented alongside the cutting.

political contemporaries.<sup>85</sup> Although such accounts are not especially renowned for accurate versions of events they do contain fragmentary data that alludes to the impact of collaboration on design practice and its dissemination.

To explore the network that informed and constructed this mediation these sources are combined with archival documentation, for example, papers of governmental and official bodies, such as the Board of Trade (held at the National Archive in Kew, London), the Fashion Group of America (held at the Public Library in New York), the Minutes of the Incorporated Society's Designers' Meetings (held at the Archive of Art and Design in Earls Court, London) and the Council of Industrial Design (held at the Design Council Archive, University of Brighton). These were supplemented with material taken from the archival holdings of cultural intermediaries such as the BBC (held at the BBC Written Archive, Reading); the Royal Family (held at the Royal Archive, Windsor) and the Royal Ballet (held at the Royal Opera House Archive, London). For social accounts the Mass Observation Archive (held at Sussex University) proved insightful, in particular its holdings of interviews undertaken with many members of the fashion industry in the early years of the war. The Records of the British Clothing Industries Association at the Modern Records Centre Warwick were also important in tracing the links between the couture industry and the broader British fashion industry. The recent release of the Pathé Film archive was particularly helpful and allowed the printed mediation of the couturiers to be supplemented by the analysis of many promotional films in which the couturiers either featured or participated.

A large number of interviews were also undertaken with those connected with the designers and the industry; the most important of these was with Clive Evans, the last couturier to join the Incorporated Society and only surviving member. Unfortunately little of this oral history has been included in the final thesis as many of the recollections were based in the 1950s and 60s, which sat outside of the study's timeframe.

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<sup>85</sup> For example: *Lancashire and Whitehall: The Diary of Sir Raymond Streat, Vol. I. 1931-39, Vol. II. 1939-57*, edited by Margaret Dupree (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), *The Duff Cooper Diaries 1915 - 1951*, edited by John Julius Norwich (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005), Dame Alix Meynell, *Public Servant, Private Woman: An Autobiography* (Victor Gollancz, 1988), *Self Portrait With Friends: The Selected Diaries of Cecil Beaton*, edited by Richard Buckle (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979), Sue Shephard, *The Surprising Life of Constance Spry* (Oxford: Macmillan, 2010), Peter Lewis-Crown, *House of Lachasse: The Story of a Very English Gentleman* (London: Delancey, 2009) Robb, *Lifestyle* (London: Elm Tree Books, 1979), Margaret Duchess of Argyll, *Forget Not* (London: W H Allen and Co., 1975), Edna Woolman-Chase, *Always in Vogue* (Victor Gollancz, 1954), Harry W. Yoxall, *A Fashion of Life* (New York: Taplinger Publishing, 1966), Eric Newby, *Something Wholesale: My Life and Times in the Rag Trade* (London: William Collins & Son, 1962), Raymond Zelker, *The Polly Peck Story: A Memoir* (London: Strathern, 2001), Barbara Cartland, *The Isthmus Years 1919 - 1939* (London: Hutchinson)

The primary research is contextualised throughout by drawing on the work of social, political and economic historians such as Martin Pugh, Ross McKibbin, David Cannadine, Arthur Marwick, Susan Brewer, Angus Calder and Sir Alex Cairncross.<sup>86</sup> These help to explain and explore the social and political networks constructed around the Incorporated Society. To analyse the narratives that emanated from this couture collaboration secondary literature that focuses on the projection of national identity has also been important. For example, work such as Philip M. Taylor's, *The Projection of Britain: British Overseas Publicity and Propaganda 1919 – 1939*, which focuses on the hidden operation and mechanisms of the country's interwar propaganda.<sup>87</sup> This work challenges traditional assumptions of modern British politics. Work on cultural production within the same period, such as Alexandra Harris's *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper*, was also influential and reflects a recent academic shift that considers the different cultural forms of English modernity.<sup>88</sup> Books such as these cast a different light on the construction of British modernity and political and cultural identity in the interwar period, which can underpin an analysis of the projection of a modern London couture industry. For the war and post-war period, work that subverts the traditional understanding of the 'People's War' (the idea that everyone pulled together at a moment of crisis) and the post-war consensus have proved important in understanding the narratives constructed around the Incorporated Society. For example, work within film studies such as Pam Cook's *Fashioning the Nation: Costume and Identity in British Cinema*, which considers the

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<sup>86</sup> For example, Susan Brewer, *To Win the Peace: British Propaganda in the United States during World War II* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997), Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939 – 1945* (London: Pimlico, 1992), Alex Cairncross, *The British Economy since 1945* (London: Wiley Blackwell, 1995), Arthur Marwick, *Class: Image and Reality in Britain, France and the USA since 1930* (London: Collins, 1980), W. K. Hancock, and M. M. Gowing, *History of the Second World War: British War Economy* (H.M.S.O 1949), Sonia Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain, 1939 – 45* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), Leonora Davidoff, *The Best Circles: Society, Etiquette and The Season* (Croom Helm Ltd, 1973) Charles Jennings, *Them and Us: The American Invasion of British High Society* (Sutton Publishing, 2007), Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918 – 1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), David Cannadine, *The Decline & Fall of the British Aristocracy* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1990), Martin Pugh, *We Danced All Night: A Social History of Britain Between The Wars* (Vintage Books, 2009)

<sup>87</sup> Philip M. Taylor, *The Projection of Britain: British overseas publicity and propaganda 1919 – 1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981)

<sup>88</sup> Alexandra Harris *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (Thames and Hudson, 2010) Harris draws on and challenges the idea of 'conservative modernism' suggested in Alison Light's *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (Routledge, reissued 2013) Recent studies that suggest different formations and understandings of English modernity can be seen in Cheryl Buckley, *Designing Modern Britain* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007) pp. 83 – 124, also Christopher Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture and Domesticity* (Yale University Press, 2004)

place of flamboyant dress and escapism within British National Cinema.<sup>89</sup> This study of Gainsborough films indicates the space for anti-collective sensibilities and the female subversion of the overriding propaganda and controls of the period. Similar impulses are also addressed in relation to women's reactions to government control of consumption by Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska in *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls and Consumption 1939 – 1955*.<sup>90</sup> The findings of these authors are particularly pertinent for a study of luxury production in a period of intense political propaganda that advocated consumer constraint, self-denial and social altruism. How women were constrained by these ideas can also be found in studies of wartime national identity formation such as Antonia Lant's *Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Cinema* or Sonia Rose's, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain 1939 – 45*. What all these texts have in common is a female perspective, which in turn challenges previous assumptions made about British society and national identity in the war and immediate post-war period. These suggest interesting perspectives for an approach to the London couturiers and the narratives that were developed to maintain luxury production throughout the period of this study.

### **Thesis Structure**

The study follows a chronological structure, which is separated into four chapters that give equal weight to an exploration of the development of the London couture industry in both the 1930s and 1940s. Therefore, the framing device for the overall thesis; the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers, which was not created until 1942, does not emerge as a point of analytical focus until the later part of the thesis. This is a result of the concerns of the enquiry overall, which draws its focus from the stated aims set out for the Society in its Constitution and follows the contention that these objectives were the product of specific developments in the interwar period. It is therefore not only the operation of the Society but also the impetus towards and the objectives that underpinned this designer-collaboration that propels the argument. Whilst each chapter performs many functions in its use of primary material to explore the role of London's couture industry within the city's hierarchical positioning as a fashion centre, they also address their own individual concerns.

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<sup>89</sup> Pam Cook, *Fashioning the Nation: Costume and Identity in British Cinema* (BFI Publishing, 1996)

<sup>90</sup> Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls and Consumption 1939 – 1955* (Oxford University Press, 2002), Antonia Lant in *Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Cinema* (Princeton: New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1991), Sonia Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain, 1939 – 45* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003)

At the analytical core of Chapter one, which explores the evolution of a London couture industry, is the process of professionalisation of design practice. This transformation always has the construction of distinction and exclusivity as its ultimate goal, as an essential objective is the separation of an occupation from similar practices that surround it. As mediation plays such an important part in reinforcing professional legitimacy, the primary material used for this chapter is predominately drawn from the extensive press books created by the designers Victor Stiebel, Hardy Amies and Digby Morton. This is because it is the construction of both self and public awareness that to a certain extent constitutes the most important element of professionalisation. Unlike the following chapters, which trace the chronological developments of the industry in a more linear manner, this chapter constructs the narrative around three specific often concurrent and overlapping themes, these are the commercial, social and political factors that facilitated the construction of the professional identity of the London couturiers.

Chapter 2 then looks specifically at the years 1935 – 1939 and is primarily concerned with the role collaboration played within not only the professionalisation of this form of design but also within attempts to use these designers to control the fashion system. To do this it focuses on the activity of the previously undocumented Fashion Group of Great Britain. This offers an example of designer-collaboration prior to 1942, which allows the argument, at a later point, to address whether the Incorporated Society was a continuation or break from pre-war activity. The fact that the Fashion Group of Great Britain has never previously been subjected to a sustained analysis is perhaps explained by the fact that it primarily operated as an informal network of business-to-business activity and has not left a specific archive for the historian. The construction of this case study has therefore involved a careful piecing together of information from a wide variety of disparate sources. The most insightful of these were those held in New York in the Records of the Fashion Group International, as its holdings demonstrate that this body was a branch of an American organisation. As a national body the British Fashion Group brought together the London couturiers with a range of practitioners from other creative fields as part of the interwar process to promote the importance of design and the designer to industry. It therefore allows the analysis of the professionalisation of the London couture industry to be positioned within the historical discourse of British interwar design reform. Yet the recognition that it stemmed from developments in

America extends the exploration into a broader transatlantic network and offers an historical example of a manipulative and interconnected creative economy.

Chapter 3 then moves to the war years, 1939 – 1945, the period when the Incorporated Society was created. Whilst it considers examples of designer-collaboration and how the war facilitated the design reform aspirations explored in the previous chapter, it also acknowledges that these activities were distorted by the social, political and economic changes brought about by the conflict. At a time of war the production of elite, fashionable, made-to-measure dress could be seen as an unpatriotic frivolity and ultimately irrelevant. In recognition of this, the main focus of this chapter is to question how this field of design was sustained throughout the war. The creation of the Incorporated Society was not a response to a normal consumer society but to one that was constrained by social attitudes and governmental legislation particularly towards restraint and against conspicuous consumption. In this chapter designer-collaboration and the creation of the Society are therefore examined as strategies adopted to defend this form of luxury production. In order to document how the war affected the couture industry this chapter is able to draw on an invaluable source; the Incorporated Society's Minutes held at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Whilst a unique historical record to reflect on the designers' concerns and the problems encountered within collaboration, the minutes of the designers' meetings were records created for public scrutiny and are a censored and controlled form of documentation. This is also true of sources often used by social and political historians, for instance, the records of government departments such as the Board of Trade and Foreign Office and even to a certain extent interviews conducted by Mass Observation. Yet, in conjunction with the basic information documented in the Minutes, these are used to demonstrate why the couturiers' adopted specific strategies of defence. Once again, the chapter also draws on newspaper and magazine reports, for at a time when propaganda infiltrated all forms of public documentation these sources are recognised as part of a defence strategy which can be used to demonstrate the mediated narrative constructed to legitimate this form of luxury production.

Chapter 4 considers the immediate period of post-war reconstruction, 1946 – 1949. It is at this point that the thesis can now explore the operation of the Incorporated Society. It addresses not only why the Society, a wartime strategy for business preservation, continued into the post-war period but also how it was shaped by shifting power structures in the national and international fashion industry. In the dominant

discourse of the western fashion system this period is recognised as the 'age of the New Look' when Christian Dior's collection of February 1947 caused a seismic shift in the fashion industry and repositioned Parisian hegemony within the international fashion system.<sup>91</sup> The affect this had on the identity and narratives that surrounded the British couture industry has however never previously been considered in detail. This chapter will therefore trace the move from the internationalism of the interwar period towards national differentiation within the fashion system. Within this timeframe the need to increase exports and to reassert cultural and industrial strength became a preoccupation of many nations. In Britain, for example, recognition of the significance of the role of design within this process saw the government's creation of the Council of Industrial Design. However, the political acknowledgement of the importance of London's recognition as a fashion centre was a slower process. Within design historical discourse there is little recognition of fashion within the design reform agenda of this period, and this is particularly notable in its omission from the literature on the main design event, the Britain Can Make It exhibition of 1946, even though dress and textiles constituted a quarter of its displays. Whilst this chapter addresses this oversight it primarily considers the impulse towards design reform to tackle its fundamental concern, which is to question the extent to which the Society fulfilled the aims set out in its Constitution. To a certain extent, Chapter 4, which explores the positioning of the London couture industry in the post war economic, cultural and political landscape, can be seen to repeat many of the concerns of the preceding chapters. This, however, allows the thesis to draw on the previously exposed themes in order to explore aspects of continuation and consolidation within the grouping of the London couturiers under the banner of Incorporated Society. This ultimately allows it to demonstrate the extent to which the aspirations of the networks that had evolved around the London couturiers came to fruition.

Despite the specific focus of each chapter they all address the construction of the fashion industry's hierarchies in relation to the highly specific social, economic and political conditions of Britain during the 1930s and 1940s. Through empirical research this thesis will therefore provide a better understanding of how London became acknowledged as a fashion centre and in particular the role designer-collaboration played within this recognition. It explores the networks and narratives that were used to

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<sup>91</sup> See for example, Harry Hopkins, *The New Look: A Social History of the Forties and Fifties in Britain*, (London: Secker & Warbury, 1964)



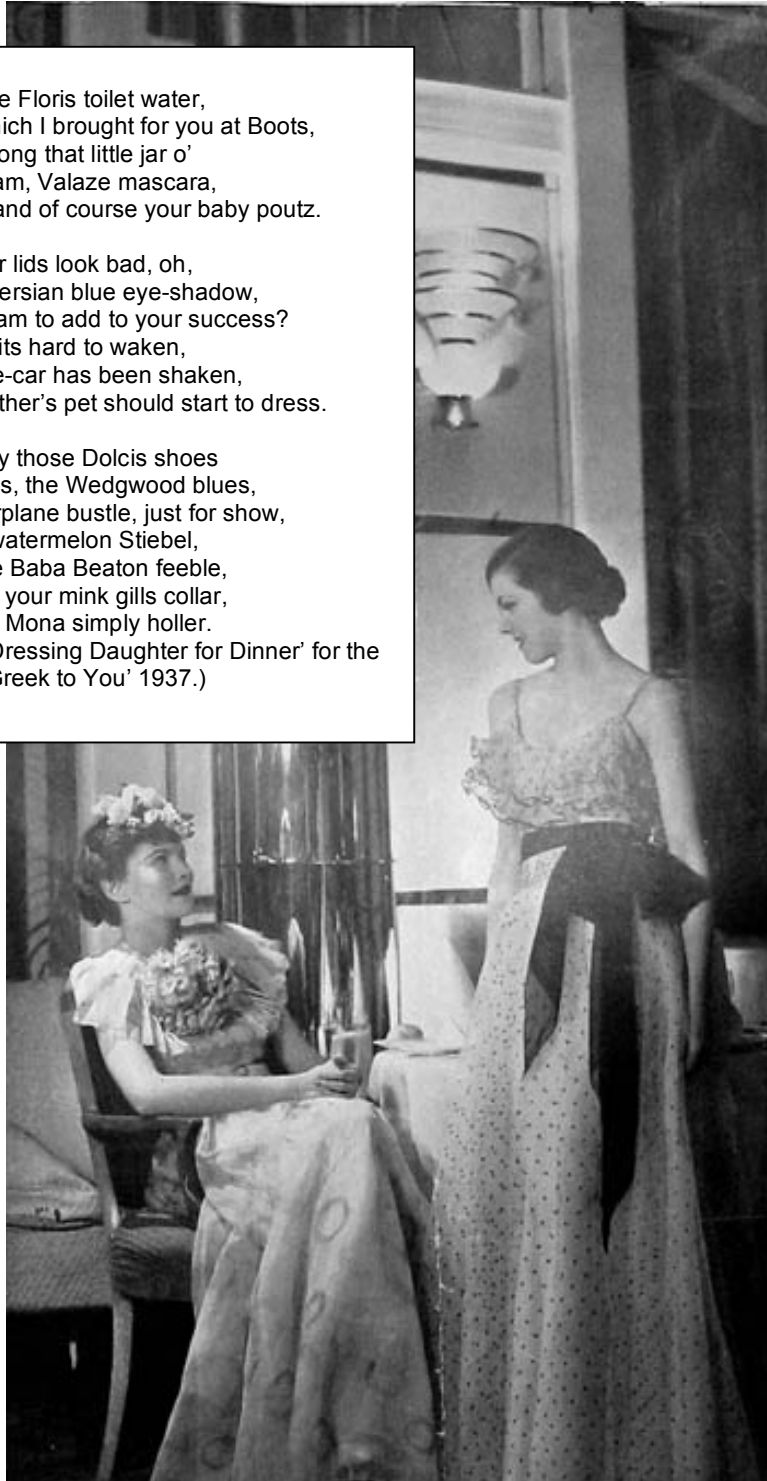
sustain a specific form of luxury fashion production throughout a particularly turbulent economic, social and political period, in order to question whether by 1949, when the wartime controls over clothing production finally ended, the London couturiers had fulfilled the Incorporated Society's stated objectives to ensure that London retained its position as a fashion centre. The research therefore questions whether the members of the nation's couture industry established unprecedented and much needed cohesion for the British fashion industry and the exact nature of its role within the construction and understanding of London as an internationally recognised fashion centre. In so doing, it explores the wider significance of the work of these elite made-to-measure dressmakers both within the discipline of Design History and beyond it.

**London Launches a Mode:  
The New School of English Fashion and the Development of a Fashion  
Centre in the 1930s**

Here's the Floris toilet water,  
And the perstick which I brought for you at Boots,  
Bring along that little jar o'  
Velva cream, Valaze mascara,  
Your new eye-tebs and of course your baby poutz.

My, your lids look bad, oh,  
Where's the Persian blue eye-shadow,  
And the ruby cream to add to your success?  
I know its hard to waken,  
But your side-car has been shaken,  
And it's time that mother's pet should start to dress.

Why not try those Dolcis shoes  
Not the browns, the Wedgwood blues,  
And that sexy airplane bustle, just for show,  
In your watermelon Stiebel,  
You'll make Baba Beaton feeble,  
And I know your mink gills collar,  
Will make Mona simply holler.  
(Lyrics by Cole Porter "Dressing Daughter for Dinner" for the  
show 'Greek to You' 1937.)



[In London's Mayfair] the very air announces that something important is about to happen. For, behind the hushed doors of Bruton, Grosvenor, Regent and Bond Streets, the new spring clothes are being born. First we call on Madame Isobel [...] we marvel to ourselves at the enigma of an artist who is also an executive [...] her intriguing prophesies merely whet our appetite for more and we urge our oracle for news of colour and fabric. [From Norman Hartnell ... Victor Stiebel ... Glen Glenny ... Madame Champcommunal ... Peter Russell ... Digby Morton] we gather a picture of what we shall wear next spring.<sup>92</sup>

In January 1935, *Vogue*, in an article entitled 'London Launches a Mode', informed its British readership that seven English dressmakers now operated as an influential source of original ideas and fashion leadership. This article was particularly notable, as this magazine had previously promoted Paris-based couturiers as the only source for the creation of new fashions. The next month *Harper's Bazaar* also claimed that these same designers (with the inclusion of 'Charlie' James and Eva Lutyens) had ensured that in London 'the pulse of fashion grows stronger day by day', and that the city was 'a sure competitor to Paris', particularly in the production of 'sensational new evening silhouettes'.<sup>93</sup> Whilst these claims, in British editions of American owned publications, could be read as tokenistic gestures to the local culture, they are substantiated by their reproduction in their American editions and in a range of international news reports.<sup>94</sup> For example, *The New York Times*, a good barometer of transatlantic recognition, had previously highlighted many of these designers, (with the addition of Edward Symonds, the owner of Reville Ltd. and Hardy Amies the in-house designer at Lachasse) as the key protagonists in what it defined as London's 'new culture of dress design'.<sup>95</sup>

In his 1954 autobiography Norman Hartnell gave a brief explanation for this changed attitude towards London-based dressmakers, in his mention of the 'growth of a new school of English fashion'.<sup>96</sup> The dressmakers he referred to followed the approach and understanding of made-to-measure production created by the Parisian couture system and adopted its policy of seasonal fashion-aware collections in discrete salons for an exclusive clientele. In the 1930s, the use of the French term couturier for the

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<sup>92</sup> 'London Launches a Mode', *British Vogue*, 23 January 1935 (taken from Victor Stiebel Fashion Designer: Press albums 1932 – 1963, AAD/1994/ 1-22 (Henceforth source cited as: VSPA/AAD/1194)

<sup>93</sup> 'The Pulse of Fashion', *Harper's Bazaar*, February 1935 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>94</sup> For example, press Reports that describe London as a fashion capital are extensive within the cuttings in both Victor Stiebel's and Hardy Amies' press-cutting books. The former are held at the Archive of Art and Design (AAD/1994/1-22), the later at the House of Amies, 14 Savile Row, London W1S 3JN.

<sup>95</sup> Ann Archer, 'British threaten French Corner on Style Rule', *United Press Red Letter* (New York), 6 October 1933 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>96</sup> Norman Hartnell, 1955, p. 106

members of this 'new school' of English fashion was new and primarily used in the discourse constructed by high-fashion magazines such as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. The term *couture* or *couturier* was used to denote the highest point of prestige and industry dominance. In the 1930s the London practitioners however, often referred to themselves as 'dressmakers' and their businesses as 'dress / model' houses.<sup>97</sup> To a certain extent this reticence is indicative of the 'widely felt uncertainty' in the construction of professional identity for many designers in the 1930s.<sup>98</sup> Yet, fashion historians have acknowledged that this was the decade that saw a 'new generation of couturiers gradually replace London's traditional court dressmakers.'<sup>99</sup> The academic research undertaken to explain this transformation is however sparse. This chapter will therefore explore the construction of the professional design identity of London-based couturiers and the role they played in the capital's recognition as an internationally relevant fashion centre.

Evidence from a range of national and international fashion magazines and press reports demonstrates that from the middle of the 1930s, the idea that a number of London's made-to-measure dressmakers were now operating as couturiers received constant endorsement. However, in terms of this mediated acknowledgment, 1936 was the tipping point in London's recognition as a destination for the consumption of creative dress design. In that year, for instance, *The Sunday Referee* newspaper declared that 'there is only a short history of British dress designing [...and] this is the first year that London is hailed as an individual fashion centre'.<sup>100</sup> This assertion was supported not only by the notable upsurge in the amount and type of press attention given to specific London dressmakers but also by the number of foreign buyers at its salon presentation; which in 1936 suddenly increased in number and included representatives from eighteen different countries.<sup>101</sup> To examine and explain the altered position of a number of London's dressmakers, this chapter focuses on the commercial, social and political infrastructure that supported their design identity as couturiers. This approach draws on

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<sup>97</sup> Even by the 1950s when a London *couture* industry was fully recognised, the members of the Incorporated Society themselves were often still reticent about using this term to describe their work. This reserve is clearly discernable in Hardy Amies' 1954 autobiography, where the use of the term *couturier* to describe London practitioners is always placed in italics.

<sup>98</sup> See for example Jonathan M. Woodham *The Industrial Designer and the Public* (London: Pembridge, 1983), which shows that design and designers were often referred to with a myriad of names such as 'commercial art,' industrial art,' or 'industrial designer'.

<sup>99</sup> Valerie Mendes and Amy de la Haye, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Fashion* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), p.36

<sup>100</sup> 'These Four Young Men Dictate Designs for Women: Hartnell, Stiebel, Russell, Symonds', *Sunday Referee*, March 1936 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>101</sup> This number of attendees was repeated throughout a range of newspaper reports held in the Stiebel Press-cutting books (VSPA/AAD/1994/1)

the insights of recent scholarship, particularly within urban geography, which consider the structures needed within the cultural economy of fashion cities, and highlight the need not only for the creative agency of designers but more importantly a developed commercial and promotional culture.<sup>102</sup> David Gilbert, for example, in his assessment of Paris' prominence as a fashion city, highlights a range of factors that supported its sustained position. He acknowledges the importance of not only its ability to produce innovative fashion guidance but also the specific structure of its couture industry; the clustering of elite designers; and more generally, the need for a tradition of dress that has a strong place-specific element.<sup>103</sup>

In the 1930s, London's elite dress culture was given clear definition by Britain's established monarchy and aristocracy, which unlike much of Europe had been sustained into the twentieth century. The social structures that had evolved around this titular elite, in both its idiosyncratic country-based sporting activities and its court-based social arena, offered London's designers a unique national platform for both the stimulation of consumption and the display of fashionable dress. This, however, had not previously led to the establishment of a recognizable London couture industry. Wealthy Englishwomen either took their custom to Paris, bought imported garments, or had their clothes made to their own (often conservative) versions of French models.<sup>104</sup> The design authority of Britain's made-to-measure designers was therefore restricted by both their clients' belief that Paris was the only source of creative fashion and their characteristic reticence in the consumption of obviously new and conspicuously styled clothing. This suggests that the traditional dress culture of the capital's social scene and its participants' preference for French models needed careful navigation by any London-based designer who aspired to the creative autonomy and contemporary relevance of a couturier.

This chapter will question why the 1930s, an era of economic depression, was the formative decade for English creative fashion and the period when a range of London dressmakers established their professional identity and authority as couturiers. To do so it explores the commercial, social, economic and political factors behind the establishment of the London-based couture industry in order to understand the altered

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<sup>102</sup> See H. Molotch, 'LA as Product: How Design Works in a Regional Economy' in *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, edited by A.J. Scott and E.W. Soja (California: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 225 – 375 and A.J. Scott, *The Cultural Economy of Cities* (Sage, 2000)

<sup>103</sup> Gilbert, 2006, pp. 3 – 32

<sup>104</sup> Yoxall, 1966, pp. 67 -70

narrative that surrounded the 'new school' designers and the infrastructure that supported London's evolution as a fashion centre.

### **1:1) The New School of English Fashion, 1930 - 1936: From Court Dressmakers to Mayfair Couturiers**

In the interwar period London was at the centre of the political, social and economic life of Britain. An Imperial capital, it was the nexus of trade and governance for an Empire that still presided over one fifth of the world's population. The West End, in particular, had a long-standing status as a retail environment for new goods and novelties linked to the trading systems of the British Empire. The support this global exchange offered to the development of menswear in the nineteenth century has been documented by the fashion historian Christopher Breward, who has noted its impact on a plethora of men's tailors, shirt-makers and hatters that flourished in and around Savile Row and catered to an affluent and international clientele.<sup>105</sup> In the case of womenswear, a source such as Charles Pascoe's *Illustrated Handbook for the Season* from 1890 demonstrates that London's made-to-measure dress houses were equally numerous, although they have received only limited documentation.<sup>106</sup> This source cites an extensive range of elite West End dress houses, to fully support its claim that for the female consumer in 'a city where fashion's votaries are so numerous and wealthy, there is abundant opportunity for gratifying every personal taste, caprice, or whim in respect of style, make and material'.<sup>107</sup> A tourist guide for those unaccustomed to London's commercial arena, the *Illustrated Handbook* demonstrates the clearly defined geographic space of elite female consumption. At the end of the nineteenth century, fashionable dress houses were located primarily in Piccadilly, Regent and Bond Streets, with the most elite around Hanover Square and Grosvenor Street. It is therefore of little surprise that forty years later members of the 'new school of English fashion' chose this area of Mayfair as their site of production. For example, Hartnell set up there in 1928, Stiebel in 1932 and Russell and Mattli in 1933. The business historian Andrew Godley has examined the benefits of an efficient local economy for the East End's mass-manufactured dress trade. He has shown that, in the interwar period, location and interdependence of production, with subsidiary merchants for fabric and accessories, skilled labour and clearly defined

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<sup>105</sup> Breward, 2004, p. 100

<sup>106</sup> Charles Eyre Pascoe, *London of To-day: An Illustrated Handbook for the Season*, (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1890)

<sup>107</sup> Pascoe, 1890

distribution channels, were key determinants to commercial success.<sup>108</sup> In a similar manner, the historical development of the West End and in particular the district of Mayfair, allowed young made-to-measure dressmakers to operate from within a fully established site of elite women's clothing production, promotion, and consumption.

In the history of London retail, the interwar period has often been portrayed as a depressed commercial phase for the West End; situated between the heyday of the department store in the Edwardian period and Carnaby Street in the Swinging Sixties.<sup>109</sup> The 1930s, in particular, has often been considered through the lower-middle class experience of the chain store or the upper-middle class culture of thrift.<sup>110</sup> Yet this ignores the developments that took place in the luxury retail sector, which witnessed London become a more important destination for the acquisition of such goods. Bronwyn Edwards's reassessment of the 'shopping geographies' of London's West End in the pages of British *Vogue* has shown that, in the 1930s, Mayfair was a 'focal pull' within the network of expanded retail and consumption throughout the nation.<sup>111</sup> This allowed magazines and tourist guides to present a carefully defined geography of fashionable consumption, where as Edwards points out, 'the precise location where shopping took place was as important as what was purchased'.<sup>112</sup> The fact that throughout the interwar period Mayfair became a more important shopping destination and source of fashionable consumption is demonstrated through an analysis of Victor Stiebel's promotional strategies. Figure 3 for example, is an advert Stiebel placed in *Vogue* in 1933 and clearly demonstrates that a Mayfair address was an essential marketing device for a young designer, setting out to establish his fashion credentials. Here, his name, his acknowledgement by the fashion press and the cultural connotations of the elite urban position of his Mayfair salon combine to assert the commercial relevance of his business.

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<sup>108</sup> Andrew Godley, 'The development of the UK clothing industry, 1850 – 1950: output and productivity growth,' *Business History*, Volume 37, Number 4, 1995, p.33

<sup>109</sup> Erica Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women and the Making of London's West End*, (Princeton University, 2000) and Christopher Breward, *Fashioning London: Clothing the Modern Metropolis*, (Berg, 2004)

<sup>110</sup> Janice Winship, Culture of Restraint: The British Chain Store 1920 – 1939 in *Commercial Cultures: Economies, Practices, Spaces*, edited by Peter Jackson et. al. (Berg, 2000), and for a culture of thrift and 'simple elegance' that was adopted as a rejection of mass consumption see Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s – 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.88

<sup>111</sup> Bronwyn Edwards, 'We are fatally influenced by goods brought in Bond Street: London, Shopping and the Fashionable Geographies of 1930s Vogue', *Fashion Theory*, Volume 10, Issue 1 – 2 (Berg, 2006), pp. 73 – 96

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

# VICTOR STIEBEL LTD

DRESS MAKER MILLINER FURRIER

22 BRUTON STREET BERKELEY SQUARE LONDON

TELEPHONE NUMBER MAYFAIR 0048 AND 0049

## VICTOR STIEBEL LTD

DRESS MAKER MILLINER FURRIER

22 BRUTON STREET BERKELEY SQUARE LONDON

TELEPHONE NUMBER MAYFAIR 0048 AND 0049

**COLOR NOTIONS IN DRESS HACKNEYED**  
No One Looks Twice Any More, Says Designer

By Associated Press  
NEW YORK, Dec. 1.—Throw out all your old notions of color combinations, except black and white, and stand over again, Victor Stiebel, London designer, tonight advised women who wish to dress wisely.

"Women have used certain combinations in costumes after year until they are so now that no one looks at twice," he declared.

"Everyone is tired of red and blue, of brown and green, of yellow and pink. If it's black they turn it with red."

"Any type in color effects can get more effective combinations than these. Specifically, there are all the colors in an artist's palette to work with."

The 30-year-old English couturier for some of London's smartest dressed women, he attempted to revitalize some habits of America's all-black cost.

he said, "It's a color combination that will be the color of the future."

**Women of Fashion Approve Creations at First Showing of Young British Designer**  
BY JUDY DART.

A LARGE and fashionable luncheon group on "Thanksgiving Eve" in London approved the creations of a young British designer, Victor Stiebel, at his first showing of "Colors for Examination."

Stiebel, who is only 27 years old, is himself one of the members of the group, but he made fashion a reality for the group by showing his own creations. He is a member of the group, but he made fashion a reality for the group by showing his own creations.

Stiebel's clothes were made of the finest materials and were of the latest design. He is a member of the group, but he made fashion a reality for the group by showing his own creations.

**London Stylist Arrives with New Creations**  
Victor Stiebel, London's newest and one of its most successful dress designers, has arrived on the scene with a collection of his latest style creations. American fashion editors and buyers are flocking to his show.

**POPULAR IN LONDON**  
Fashionable London has heaped a path to his door. He is lavish in complimenting the smart American women for their inherent sense of simplicity in clothes, and feels that he shares the responsibility for the fact that English women are more interested in simple, well-cut clothes than they ever have been before.

"The future of clothes," he said, "lies at a goal where the desire for simplicity will be supreme. In creating a dress movement and color contrasts are prime considerations. Beautiful cut and workmanship that look like nothing on a hanger, but that come to life and move."

**Designer Sees End Of Current Dress Color Combinations**  
By Associated Press  
New York, Dec. 1.—Throw out all your old notions of color combinations, except black and white, and stand over again, Victor Stiebel, London designer, tonight advised women who wish to dress wisely.

"Women have used certain combinations in costumes after year until they are so now that no one looks at twice," he declared.

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Figure 3:  
Victor Stiebel Advert, Vogue, March 1933



A key factor that supported Mayfair's ability to operate as the nation's central point for the consumption of luxury fashion goods was the relaxation of its tenancy agreements in 1928. This change in planning law saw the area swiftly move from primarily residential to commercial occupancy. The *London Post Office Directory* from 1936 demonstrates the impact of this development, as it evidences the establishment of a wide variety of luxury businesses.<sup>113</sup> For example, in Bruton Street (where Hartnell and Stiebel opened their dress houses) this network of luxury trading ranged from the society decorator Sibyl Colefax, to beauty salons, corsetieres, milliners, goldsmiths, art dealers, wine merchants, motor car showrooms, furriers, furniture dealers and a selection of court dressmakers and ladies and military tailors. The presence of these luxury businesses can be seen to have supported and nurtured the emergent London couture industry, as it encased its development within what Christopher Breward has defined as the 'microcosm of the fashionable consumers' bijoux world'.<sup>114</sup>

Mayfair's claim to fashion authority and attraction for consumers of couture was bolstered not only by a rise in luxury traders but also by the influx of Parisian couturiers to the English capital. For example, Edward Molyneux took up premises on Grosvenor Street in February 1932, followed by Elsa Schiaparelli in 1934. Two smaller, newer, but nevertheless significant designers, Dilkusha and Karinska, opened businesses the next year and they were followed, by the end of 1936, by Robert Piguet and Jacques Heim. Whilst all these couturiers remained firmly based in Paris, an additional house in Mayfair was clearly a beneficial business strategy. The fact that all but one of these couturiers were not French should be seen as significant, as their presence in Paris was not based on national allegiance but on commercial dictates: it was the only recognised destination for couture production.<sup>115</sup> Their movement to London is an indication of Mayfair's ability to support the growth of a substantial couture industry. It is also of note that by May 1937 so many French couturiers either opened a London house or came over to present their collections that the Parisian couturier Jenny had to include the fact that 'it had no branch in the United Kingdom' in its *Vogue* adverts.

The movement of Parisian couture houses to London was a response not only to the increased commercial viability of Mayfair as a source of luxury fashion but also to the

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<sup>113</sup> *Post Office London Directory*, held at London Metropolitan Archives, (Ref 3.4)

<sup>114</sup> Christopher Breward, 'Fashion's Front and Back: Rag Trade Cultures and Cultures of consumption in Post-War London', *The London Journal*, (Special Issue) Volume 31, Number 1, 2006, pp. 15 – 40

<sup>115</sup> Molyneux was English, Schiaparelli Italian, Dilkusha British (Princess Dilkusha de Rohan raised in India) Karinska Ukrainian, Piguet Swiss, only Heim was French. Many of these couturiers that came to Britain placed specific emphasis on designing sportswear in their London houses.

era's economic situation. Prior to 1932, Paquin and Worth were the only Paris houses of note that operated in London. Paris' hegemony was such that its couturiers had been able to expect English clients to come to them. However, since the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the ensuing worldwide depression the Parisian couture industry had lost a large proportion of its business.<sup>116</sup> French exports, which relied on wine and luxury goods, fell, from 50.1 billion Francs in 1929 to 14.7 billions in 1936 and the Parisian couture industry was put under financial pressure.<sup>117</sup> The French capital also experienced significant labour unrest between 1932 and 1936.<sup>118</sup> The loss of custom and production problems saw many Paris-based couturiers search for a wider market and London's Mayfair obviously presented a viable alternative.

By the middle of the 1930s, evidence taken from press and magazine articles on London fashion indicates that alongside the Parisian couture houses there were also twenty-nine dressmakers of note with a Mayfair (W1) postcode.<sup>119</sup> The geography of London's elite fashion production was therefore developed on a village scale, with all these businesses located within a five-minute walk from 'bustling Bond Street' to 'sedate and wealthy Berkeley Square'.<sup>120</sup> Within this geographical arrangement Grosvenor Street became the fulcrum of creative fashion production. This was consolidated by the arrival of Edward Molyneux's business, which can be seen to have actively motivated many established dressmakers with substantial businesses to undertake expensive relocations.<sup>121</sup> For example, in March 1932 the dressmaker Eileen Idare, moved her 500 employees to operate from this location. Mme. Hayward who became business partner with the couturier Karinska also moved from New Bond Street to 67 Grosvenor Street in March, followed by Worth (London) and also Digby Morton who left Palace Gate in Kensington for number 63 in July. In September, Madam Isobel, who had operated from Regent Street since 1919, also moved her dress-house to Grosvenor Street. Despite her

<sup>116</sup> Grumbach, Didier, *Histoires de la Mode* (Editions de Seuil, 1993), p. 32 – 33

<sup>117</sup> For a detailed consideration of these changes see W. A. Morton, *British Finance 1930-1940* (London: Arnos Press, 1978), p. 169

<sup>118</sup> Pouillard, 2008, pp. 62 – 81 (68)

<sup>119</sup> These designers were Madam Alexedis, Hardy Amies (Lachasse), Henry Bridburg, Richard Busvine (Viola Redfern Ltd.), Madam Champcommunal (Reville-Terry then Worth) Robert Douglas, Matilda Etches, Genne Glenn, Norman Hartnell, Sophia Harris (Motley), Isobel, Charles James, Alex Lord (Leathercraft), Eva Lutyen, Guiseppe Mattli, Winifred Mawdsley, Ronald Morrel, Digby Morton, Lydia Moss (who produced mainly lingerie but also a range of tea dresses), Guy Olliver, The Rahvis Sisters, Peter Russell, Victor Stiebel, Edward H. Symonds (Reville), Rose Taylor, Teddy Tinling, Ulrich Ltd., Madame Enos, Peggy Moffat, and Eileen Idare. Of these only seven became members of the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers.

<sup>120</sup> Hartnell, 1955, p.30

<sup>121</sup> 'Buying an Exclusive Frock from London: West End Fashion Kings Make a New Rule for their Trade Show and Fix a Minimum Price,' *Evening News*, 6 February 1932 (taken from Isobel Archive AAD/1991/12, Henceforth: (IA/AAD/1991))

original premises costing a reported £100,000 she now claimed Regent Street's sheer popularity, crowdedness, rent rises and lack of parking space made this geographical position untenable for a dressmaker whose 'reputation rested on the recommendation of clients rather than shop windows'.<sup>122</sup> Whilst this relocation of her 320 workers was only a short distance, it was an important business strategy, for as Paul Cohen-Portheim (the émigré anglophile chronicler of interwar Britain) noted Regent Street had begun to suffer from 'stolid respectability,' whilst the streets closer to Berkeley Square were the space of the 'more novel dressmakers'.<sup>123</sup> The clustering of made-to-measure dressmakers in Mayfair, and particularly the opening of a London house by the influential couturier Edward Molyneux, consolidated Mayfair's position so that by July 1936 *Vogue* declared that 'Grosvenor Street is becoming the street of *Haute Couture*'.<sup>124</sup> For producers of elite made-to-measure fashions geographic proximity within the commercial vibrancy of Mayfair was thus a clear prerequisite for recognition, creative legitimacy and commercial success.

Prior to the 1930s, couturiers had remained in Paris and Mayfair-based Court Dressmakers operated at the pinnacle of London's system of elite clothing production. As the latter's name implies, whilst they also supplied bridal trousseaux, eveningwear, corsets and sportswear, their reputations rested predominately on the creation of Lord Chamberlain-regulated court dress, presentation gowns and coronation robes. Their field of production focused on the activities that surrounded London's monarchy and its aristocratic social season, which ran from April (which coincided with the sitting of parliament), to the 'Glorious Twelfth' of August (the beginning of the shooting season). The season began with the presentation of debutantes to the monarch at court and operated as an elite marriage market. Members of the political and social elite also held innumerable balls, dinner parties and charity events, the most exclusive being at the aristocracy's town palaces. The Season also incorporated sporting fixtures such as Ascot, Henley Regatta and Wimbledon. After 1935, Glyndebourne Opera House became another fixture, and particularly beneficial to London dressmakers as elaborate evening dress was regulation for the outdoor picnic between acts.

For women who participated in Society, the Season was therefore a plethora of court-based activity, luncheons, cocktail parties, charity events, balls, theatre

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<sup>122</sup> 'Grosvenor-Street Mayfair – London's Most Famous Fashion Street: Isobel Leaving Regent Street', *The Evening News*, 25 June 1936 (IA/AAD/1991)

<sup>123</sup> Paul Cohen-Portheim, *Spirit of London* (London: J. Lippincott, 1930), p. 41 – 7

<sup>124</sup> *Vogue*, 22 July 1936, p. 68

productions and sporting fixtures. These occasions demanded specific types of clothing and many women 'with a significant income lavished considerable attention to their dress and its detail'.<sup>125</sup> Throughout the 1930s approximately three hundred and fifty debutantes were presented to the monarch each year at the Court of St. James, usually at the age of seventeen, with around one hundred of these being from America, the Dominions, India and the Diplomatic corps. A 'season' followed this 'coming out' with around ninety debutante dances.<sup>126</sup> The memoirs of the Duchess of Argyll ('Debutante of the Year' in 1932) demonstrate that for the wealthy socialite the excessive sartorial demands of the Season continued into the decade, as each year she commissioned 'at least a dozen evening dresses and many day outfits'.<sup>127</sup> Debutantes, 'young marrieds' and their mothers therefore provided not only established court dressmakers but also the 'new school of English fashion' with a reliable and sustainable market.

It is notable, for example, that in Victor Stiebel's adverts for his new dress house set up in 1932, he initially operated under the designation of 'court dressmaker,' (a title that drew on his previous apprenticeship and training at the house of Reville-Terry) however, within a few months this was shortened to 'dressmaker'.<sup>128</sup> This altered nomenclature should be seen in light of the traditional practice of court dressmaking, which may have ensured a ready market for made-to-measure dress but was not recognised as an incubator of contemporary fashion. Whilst the scholarship on London court dressmakers is sparse, the accepted view aligns with Pascoe's assertion in 1890 that they were not 'fashion designers in the true sense'.<sup>129</sup> This was because their output had some originality of design but primarily adapted Parisian styles to suit social conventions and their clients' more conservative tastes. Harry Yoxall (who as business manager of British *Vogue* had a professional knowledge of London's dress houses) pointed out that:

[In the 1920s] Really smart women went to Paris at least semi-annually for their clothes [...] the patriotic (or un-enterprising) rich who preferred to be dressed at home patronized establishments such as Court Dressmakers. [...] The title "court dressmaker" is significant; for their designing had little to do with fashion and concerned itself only with the round of court occasions sanctified by the Season. One began to deal with them when presented: garden-party and ball gowns

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<sup>125</sup> Yoxall, 1966, p.71

<sup>126</sup> See 'Meet My Child ... The Debs, are on the March', *Vogue*, 16 March 1938 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>127</sup> Margaret, Duchess of Argyll, *Forget Me Not* (Wyndham Publications, 1977), p. 35

<sup>128</sup> VSPA/AAD/1994

<sup>129</sup> Pascoe, 1890

were the most important items in the wardrobe, and each year there was a competitive orgy of overdressing for Ascot [... There were only] a small number of salons – WW Reville-Terry, the Maison Ross and so on – where the upper middle-class woman could find some originality of design (or should I say, some variety in copying?).<sup>130</sup>

Hardy Amies' recollection of Miss Gray Limited (the court dressmaking parent company of Lachasse) supports this assertion and highlights the unproblematic nature of adaptation. He pointed out that the company's owner, 'always bought some models in Paris, and made others to her own design, which she never pretended were anything other than adaptations of Paris models, which she had seen either in reality or reproduced in the fashion newspapers'.<sup>131</sup> Evidence taken from a range of advertisements for the services of court dressmakers, in *The Lady* magazine in the 1920s, demonstrates that copies of 'fashions direct from Paris' were ironically often promoted as their unique selling point. Such adverts clearly show that for many court dressmakers their professional esteem emanated not from originality but from the production of affordable copies of French styles, with a perfect fit and finish. The couture houses of Paris were therefore seen as above and beyond competition for the conception of original women's fashion. This was an understanding that London's court dressmaking establishments did not challenge but instead used to their own commercial advantage.

What differentiated the 'new school' of Mayfair-based couturiers, from their court dressmaking competitors was that many of them aimed to become creative designers rather than simply high-level dressmakers. To do this they shifted their focus to the creation of original models, which captured the dramatic element of fashion production rather than merely respond to customer specifications and the intricacies of construction. The creation of ball, debutante and presentation dresses often saw them operate in the same field of production as the court dressmakers but they were differentiated by their refusal to adapt French models. In the cases of Norman Hartnell, Victor Stiebel and Peter Russell for instance, the aspiration for creative design autonomy rather than accomplished dressmaking was to a certain extent a product of their backgrounds and routes into the fashion business. All three were drawn into the world of fashion through the creation of costumes for fancy dress parties and theatrical performances. Hartnell, for example, claimed he originally set out to work in 'art not trade,' and to support this

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<sup>130</sup> Yoxall, 1966, pp. 69 - 70

<sup>131</sup> Hardy Amies, *Just So Far* (London & Glasgow: Collins, 1954) p. 17

assertion recalled that Mainbocher (the American Paris-based couturier) declared of his 1927 collection that he had never seen 'so many incredibly beautiful dresses so incredibly badly made'.<sup>132</sup> In his unpublished memoirs Stiebel also noted that his first year of production contained badly constructed garments, 'where in the scramble to satisfy the snowballing of trade, customers' fittings were often rushed, workmanship suffered and several ladies complained bitterly'.<sup>133</sup> This admission is substantiated by an examination of the cut and construction of the dress shown in Figure 4. Stiebel's adverts from 1932 (an example of which can be seen in Figure 5) verify that this model was from his first year of production. The design was basic, the garment unlined and the stripes of each panel do not always line up at their seams. The construction of the dress both supports Stiebel's claim that production was rushed, whilst it also provides evidence that Stiebel's design focus was on the production of fashionable dress, for an ephemeral moment and particular aesthetic, rather than the intricacy of skilful dressmaking. To a certain extent Hartnell and Stiebel's move into the fashion industry was supported by the change of the style of dress towards simpler construction and less ornamentation. However, it should be noted that by 1936, when the London couturiers began to produce more tailored ensembles, the poor quality of construction was reduced by an influx of experienced (often Jewish) tailors and dressmakers from the Continent.

In order to develop design authority as couturiers, it was imperative that the new generation of London dressmakers convince wealthy clients (those with a yearly income of at least £3,000) to switch their allegiance from Paris, or at the very least encourage them to buy original models from both cities.<sup>134</sup> However, this was difficult to implement, as they had to negotiate their customers' 'fixed belief that original fashions needed the French capital for their creation'.<sup>135</sup> A BBC radio script, written by the dressmaker Madame Isobel in 1928, provides one of the earliest pieces of evidence of this process,

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<sup>132</sup> Norman Hartnell, 1955, p.27 & p. 44

<sup>133</sup> Victor Stiebel, *Unpublished Memoirs*, private archive belonging to Adrian Woodhouse

<sup>134</sup> The milliner Aage Tharrup, in an interview with Mass Observation in October 1939, gave the figure 'of a yearly income of at least £3,000.' (Mass Observation Archive henceforth MO: MO/TC 18 – Box 2)

<sup>135</sup> Prior to the 1930s only a handful of London-based designers, such as Lucile and Redfern, gained recognition as innovators of styles. Yet their design authority was based in part on the development of branches of their business in Paris and New York. Lucile was the professional name of Lady Duff Gordon; who had operated between 1894 and 1932. For further details see Valerie Mendes & Amy De La Haye, *Lucile: London, Paris, New York and Chicago* (London: V & A Publishing, 2009). John Redfern is also noted as an influence on the fashion for women's tailor-made daywear for further details see: Susan North, 'Redfern Limited, 1892 to 1940', *Costume*, Volume 43, 2009, pp. 85-108(24)



Figure 4: (Top) Victor Stiebel cream rayon with blue stripe dress & velvet bolero and belt, 1932, *Museum of London*, Ref. 82.691a  
 Figure 5: (Bottom) Dress used in Stiebel's 1932 advertisement, *Vogue* September 1932

through its claim that the design of original models was now a central business strategy for both Isobel and a number of her contemporaries. Her saleswomen, she maintained were constantly instructed to 'tell clients who petitioned for the inevitable French models that "Isobel designs her own models which are made by British workers".<sup>136</sup> Her advert (Figure 6) from four years later, in its promotion of 'an Isobel evening gown made in British georgette' demonstrates that this creative and patriotic agenda remained a prominent component within her promotional strategy into the 1930s.

In his autobiography Norman Hartnell also pointed out that when he first went into business in the 1920s he 'suffered from the unforgivable disadvantage of being English in England', as clients would often 'reject his models, as they were not of French origin'.<sup>137</sup> These claims are supported by contemporary press reports, which throughout the early 1930s, continued to use the similarity to Parisian styles as a measure for any English designer's fashion credentials. However, this type of reportage began to dissipate throughout the decade as many articles in both British and international newspapers began to congratulate London dressmakers, as the *Daily Express* put it, 'for having the courage of their own convictions [...and] not even bothering to get inspiration from Paris'.<sup>138</sup> In 1936, *The New York Times* contained one of the first references to the London dressmakers' new creative identity when it singled out Hartnell as an important European 'couturier' and claimed he had finally destroyed 'the idea that all designing must have a French tag'.<sup>139</sup> A report such as this demonstrates that, although French modes were still dominant, London-based dressmakers had received credit for the originality of their work, and it was this that in turn led to their mediated acknowledgment as couturiers. It is also notable that although Norman Hartnell set up his business in 1923, he claimed he did not achieve any considerable profit until 1934. This success can be understood as a result not only of his developing reputation but also of the commercial transformation of Mayfair in the early 1930s and heightened recognition as a site for the consumption of not only elite made-to-measure clothing but also original fashions.

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<sup>136</sup> 'Dress Designing as a Career for Women', script to program written by Isobel for the BBC, 31 May 1928 (IA/AAD/1991/12)

<sup>137</sup> Hartnell, 1955, p. 40

<sup>138</sup> Jane Gordon, 'Speeding-Up on 1933 Fashion: British Dress Designers Two Weeks Ahead of Paris', *Daily Express*, 23 January 1933 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>139</sup> *The New York Times* commentary reproduced in 'These Four Young Men Dictate Designs for Women: Hartnell, Stiebel, Russell, Symonds', *Sunday Referee*, March 1936 (VSPA/AAD/1994)





*Tunbridge*

*An Isobel Evening gown made  
in British georgette*



*Isobel*  
223  
REGENT STREET  
LONDON.....W.1  
AND AT HARROGATE  
( ONLY ADDRESSES )

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THE PIONEER OF  
BRITISH MODELS

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Figure 6: Advert for Isobel of Regent Street, *Vogue*, 11 May 1932

Recognition as a London couturier was therefore dependent on the ability to produce original designs and also on the setting up of a dress house within a tightly defined area of Mayfair. The interior decoration of these premises was also an important element within the shift toward the dressmakers' recognition as couturiers. Traditionally, the city's elite dressmaking was an arena particularly noted for the gendered ownership of the many West End establishments, which were predominately opened 'by ladies for ladies'.<sup>140</sup> This gendered practice was made apparent within the interior decoration of the 'atmospheric premises' of London's dressmakers, which were reliant on what has been described as; 'set dressing [...] often linked by observers to the cult of domesticity with which English feminine culture was internationally associated'.<sup>141</sup> In the 1920s, for example, there was a 'momentary attack of black' and many establishments such as Phelps-Paquin on Dover Street had black floors, black lacquered furniture, rich fabrics and gold ceilings, whilst Madam Isobel's Regent Street premises, seen in Figure 7, had a black marble platform and staircase.<sup>142</sup>

In comparison, the interior decoration of the 'new school' dress houses, designed in the early 1930s, were light, modern and professional. For instance, Hartnell and Stiebel both rejected the dark boudoir-like interiors that many female dressmakers had copied from Lucile (at this point the most internationally successful English dressmaker) and the solid arts and crafts tradition adopted by male court dressmakers such as Redfern. In 1932 Hartnell, for example, commissioned the young innovative architect Gerald Lacoste, who had just carried out the alterations on Molyneux's Grosvenor Street premises, to re-design his interior architecture.<sup>143</sup> This resulted in a space that utilised a vast expanse of bevelled mirror panels (Figure 8), which has since been recognised as a perfect example of '*moderne* pre-war commercial design'.<sup>144</sup> This style was also evident in Stiebel's millinery department situated at the top of his four-floor premises, whilst the ground floor interior, designed by Syrie Maugham (Figure 9) featured oatmeal walls,

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<sup>140</sup> Pascoe, 1890, p.134

<sup>141</sup> Breward, 2004, p.113

<sup>142</sup> Sue Shepard, *The Surprising Life of Constance Spry: From Social Reformer to Society Florist* (London: Macmillan, 2011) p. 120

<sup>143</sup> Gerald Lacoste also re-designed 19 Grosvenor Street for Rahvis in 1936

<sup>144</sup> Micheal Pick, 'Gerald Lacoste' *Thirties Society Journal*, Number 3, 1982, pp. 12 – 16



Figure 7: Interior of Isobel's Regent Street dress house  
'Modes of the Moment Isobel', *Pathé Films*, 1932





Figure 8: (Top) Norman Hartnell's Salon, c. 1936  
 Figure 9: (Bottom) Victor Stiebel's Salon, *Vogue* February 1933

mock French furniture, chandeliers and an Adam mantelpiece.<sup>145</sup> Stiebel's subtle fusion of classicism and modernism, reflected the Georgian Revival: a style of interior decoration popular in fashionable circles at the time.<sup>146</sup> This was a particularly relevant aesthetic choice for a modern fashion house as it was associated with both youth and class.

The architectural historian Peter Mandler has shown that in the 1930s this style 'acted in clear opposition to the old meaning and identities of the Arts and Crafts aesthetic as it trickled down to the masses. By embracing the Georgian, the younger generation could simultaneously reject the feeble, romantic aestheticism of their elders and the mean, fussy Englishness of bourgeois suburbia'.<sup>147</sup> Mary Lynn Stewart has also acknowledged the ability of this style, which she shows was widely evident in Paris salons and calls 'hybrid modernity', to act as a commercially successful arena 'in which to peddle the designers' claim to contemporary relevance'.<sup>148</sup> The interior of both Hartnell's and Stiebel's premises therefore presented an astute retail environment and visually aligned their practice with Parisian couturiers rather than English court dressmakers. In so doing, these designers transformed their impressive eighteenth century town houses into discrete yet vibrant, modern retail environments for the 'smart set' of fashionable society. In these hybrid-modern interiors, young male dress designers such as Hartnell and Stiebel created a seemingly less-feminine environment in which to present not only their claim to creativity but also a new professional identity.

Analysis of the copious articles written on the London dressmakers in the mid-1930s demonstrates that their gender was one of the most notable elements within their mediation as couturiers. For example, when Harry Yoxall made his retrospective assessment of the changes in London's fashion arena in the 1930s he claimed that he had witnessed 'a new and rather un-British phenomenon [...] university graduates were going into fashion designing! [...] and] they had a genuine creative taste'.<sup>149</sup> With university graduates commonly recognised as male, Yoxall's statement highlights that

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<sup>145</sup> 'Dress Designing Triumphs', *Modern Weekly*, 14 May 1932. (VSPA/AAD/1994) Syrie Maugham, (daughter of the philanthropist Dr. Thomas Barnardo) a close friend of Stiebel, was a successful interior decorator of the interwar period, renowned for her all white and cream interiors and use of Georgian furniture. From 1926 her business operated from the corner of Grosvenor Street. For further information see Pauline C. Metcalf, *Syrie Maugham* (Acanthus Press, 2010)

<sup>146</sup> For a consideration of the Georgian Revival see Elizabeth Mackellar, 'Representing the Georgian: Constructing interiors in early Twentieth Century Publications, 1890 – 1930', *Journal of Design History*, Volume 20, Number 4, 2007 pp. 325 – 342, or M., Rosso, 'Georgian London Revisited', *The London Journal*, Volume 26, 2001, pp. 35 -50

<sup>147</sup> Peter Mandler, *Fall and Rise of the Stately Home* (Yale University Press, 1999) p.279

<sup>148</sup> Stewart, 2008, p.35

<sup>149</sup> Yoxall, 1966, pp. 67 -70

the production of fashion by young educated men was an important component in the recognition of these practitioners as couturiers rather than dressmakers. In the context of the professionalisation of this field of design, the presence of young men, particularly those who moved from university to dressmaking, brought a new sensibility to the London dress scene. Whilst the main fashion showings of 1932 may have seen an equal representation of both female and male dressmakers, by 1936 as London gained increased recognition as a fashion centre, two thirds of the dress houses were operated by male designers.<sup>150</sup> Newspaper reports that refer to the creativity and design autonomy of London's dressmakers, such as the *Sunday Referee's* typical article of 1936 entitled 'These Four Men Dictate Designs for Women: Hartnell, Stiebel, Russell, Symonds', demonstrate that the gender of these producers was often an important factor within their acknowledgement as couturiers.<sup>151</sup> This was in opposition to Paris at this point, where it was often female couturiers, such as Vionnet, Chanel and Schiaparelli who 'set the [fashion] agenda after the First World War'.<sup>152</sup> To a certain extent this reflects the gender bias in British design circles in the interwar period. The design historians Suzette Worden and Jill Seddon in their consideration of the relationship between women and the redefinition of professional design at this point, have highlighted the manner in which the social construction of production saw the creative autonomy of male designers receive more recognition than their female counterparts.<sup>153</sup> This they argue was because it was a moment when the economic depression intensified accusations that women who worked outside the home deprived 'men, who had families to support, opportunities for employment'. In the formation of a London couture industry, this suggests that male designers may have found it easier and more socially acceptable to both establish their creative design autonomy and construct a professional identity as a couturier.

Thus, the process of professionalisation of London's made-to-measure clothing production, from court dressmaker to couturier, was to a certain extent a gendered affair

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<sup>150</sup> In 1932 the main shows for creative fashion design were presented equally by male and female designers by Victor Stiebel, Glenn Glenny, Reville, Hartnell, Lachasse, Worth, Molyneux, Peter Russell, Jane Munns, Isobel, Paulette, Eileen Idare, Helen Chandler and Peggy Morris by 1936 seventeen of the twenty-seven main showings were male. The future Incorporated Society was also a male dominated trade group, with only two businesswomen (Bianca Mosca & Angele Delaughne and one female in-house designer Madam Champcommunal at Worth (London).

<sup>151</sup> 'These Four Young Men Dictate Designs for Women: Hartnell, Stiebel, Russell, Symonds', *Sunday Referee*, March 1936

<sup>152</sup> Valerie Steele, *Women of Fashion: Twentieth Century Designers* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications Inc., 1991)

<sup>153</sup> Suzette Worden and Jill Seddon, 'Women Designers in Britain in the 1920s and 1930s: Defining the Professional and Redefining Design,' *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 8, No. 3. (1995), pp. 177 – 193

that aligned with social expectations. The change in the culture of the city's dress design, whereby the dressmakers were often (but not exclusively) male, operated under their own names and produced innovative and creative clothing without obvious adaptation of Parisian models, was an important element in many young London dressmakers' designation as couturiers. The first section of this chapter has therefore shown that, in order to validate their professional identity as couturiers and differentiate themselves from court dressmakers, a cluster of young dress designers drew on Mayfair's vibrant commercial infrastructure and aligned this with a shift in intent to be bespoke originators rather than adapters of French styles.

### **1:2) Creative Agency, Authentication and the Commercial Manipulation of London's Social Scene: The Case of Victor Stiebel**

In the way these things happen, smart, fashion-leading English women began to discover that some of our young home-grown designers were making beautiful, wearable, stunning clothes, which were not only grand to look at but which had behind them a complete understanding of the British feminine character. [...] Well, the sort of Englishwoman who began buying and wearing these clothes around, usually belonged to what is known as the gay international crowd. They did not sit at home in their drawing rooms. They travelled. And everywhere they went, it was noticeable that their English-designed clothes had another quality besides smartness. This they had had, of course, in their French-designed clothes. Now ... they were beginning to look right as well.<sup>154</sup>

In 1937, a patriotic *Daily Mail* article entitled 'London is the World's Fashion Centre', pointed out that the steady growth of creative English dressmakers was in large part attributable to changes in their clients' dress culture and social life. In the assertion, that the city's smart set had begun to look 'right' in their English-designed clothes, Lady Elizabeth Murray (the article's author), suggests that London had the capacity to both support and champion its aesthetic leadership. The article (Figure 10) also highlighted the increased patronage offered to 'home-grown designers' by society's fashion leaders. This was a particularly important factor for the establishment and development of any new fashion businesses, as the custom of the 'right' fashion-conscious people from within high society was a fundamental component for the commercial viability of any

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<sup>154</sup> Lady Elizabeth Murray, 'London is the World's Fashion Centre,' *Daily Mail*, 17 February 1937, p.124 (VSPA/AAD/1994)





designer, as it brought them prestige, facilitated investment and reinforced their claims to creative authority.

In order to explore how London couturiers began to compete with Paris and define their practice as modern, creative and original this section of the chapter will make specific reference to how the city's social arena was manipulated by Victor Stiebel in order to promote his professional identity as a couturier. This designer is particularly relevant because he began his operation in 1932, at the age of twenty-five, and quickly achieved both recognition for his creativity and business success. So much so, that within two years, he went from employing 30 to 200 people and within four years the Paris Editor of *Women's Wear Daily* could claim with some confidence that in 'London's dressmaking world [...] he is an Establishment with a capital E'.<sup>155</sup> Although South African by birth, Stiebel created a couture house deeply-rooted within the context of London and in the 1930s he was instrumental in the production of a new set of meanings for English dressmaking. This analysis of Stiebel's practice will therefore consider how his business responded to changes in London's social sphere and manipulated a number of promotional platforms in order to support his professional identity as a couturier.

Victor Stiebel's practice provides evidence that the shift from court dressmaker to couturier was facilitated by changes in the constitution and habits of London Society. Social historians acknowledge that the traditions of the Social Season (which supported court dressmaking) continued, however, the First World War irrevocably changed much of its character and social composition. Ross McKibbin for example, has argued that its 'exclusively aristocratic and august behaviour' prior to 1918 was replaced throughout the next twenty years 'by a kind of New York Café Society'.<sup>156</sup> His research has shown that Society encouraged the notion that it was in some sense 'open' and therefore appropriate to a democratic age. For Barbara Cartland, (the novelist and Hartnell client) this openness saw society become a 'pot pourri of the titled, the beautiful, the famous and notorious, all welded together with money'.<sup>157</sup> McKibbin also points to the 'slippery concept' of the constitution of society in the interwar period, where 'discerning too close

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<sup>155</sup> Statistics on the number of staff Stiebel employed taken from *American Fashion Group Bulletin*, 1934 (Fashion Group International Records, New York Public Library, Box 144. F.6) (Hereafter: FGIR). Claims that his business was fully established taken from Ann Perkins, 'London's Dressmaking World', *Women's Wear Daily* (New York), July 1936 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>156</sup> Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918 – 1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.31

<sup>157</sup> Barbara Cartland, *The Isthmus Years 1919 – 1939* (London: Hutchinson, 1945) p. 12

an affinity between Society and the upper class is hazardous. Whilst many within Society remained upper class, many in the 'old' upper class did not 'move in Society'. Membership was based on 'how money was spent rather than how it was earned' but also required a mix of breeding, education, wealth and cultural assumptions.<sup>158</sup> This change coincided with an unprecedented growth of nightclubs, restaurants, and large modern hotels built to encourage and accommodate an increase in wealthy visitors such as the Grosvenor in 1929 and the Dorchester in 1931. When the Season opened, these environments provided an extended arena for public display, in which the numerous entertainments were more open to moneyed newcomers.

Historians have noted that the members of this new form of Society predicated themselves on glamour, fashion and wit, rather than title and duty, and flaunted their wealth with what David Cannadine, the eminent historian of the British aristocracy, describes as 'opulent and irresistible vulgarity'.<sup>159</sup> Figure 11 is an example of the modern styles produced by Victor Stiebel for this new social elite. In the constructed image, taken from *Vogue* in May 1935, two young women turn to one another. Their relaxed poses, in evening dress decorated with exaggerated bows and corsages, show them to be confident and fashionable. In line with the fashion of the time, these garments were committed to straighter lines, greater simplicity and less ornamentation. The mannequins are presented as debutantes, and therefore part of the traditional British social season, however they are set not within the traditional splendour of a town palace but within what appears to be the reflective surfaces of a modern commercial night-time environment. To a certain extent an image such as this, which highlights the changes in London's social geography, is indicative of the extended scope offered to London's dressmakers for up-to-date fashionable dress rather than an adherence to the traditions of court dress. The altered constitution and extension of London's social arena therefore gave dress designers with aesthetic flair a specific commercial and promotional platform that could be manipulated to support their credentials as creative couturiers.

The new 'social verve' amongst London's rich, which the curator Cathy Ross argues 'encouraged the upper classes to reconstitute themselves along more glamorous

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<sup>158</sup> McKibbin, 1998, p. 2

<sup>159</sup> David Cannadine, *The Decline & Fall of the British Aristocracy* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1990) p. 342



Figure 11:  
Victor Stiebel evening gowns, *Vogue*, May 1935

American lines', also allowed London dressmakers to produce clothes that did not compromise their claim to international relevance.<sup>160</sup> This aspect, particularly for the American market, became an important component within the promotional narrative constructed to authenticate the London couturiers' aesthetic authority. In 1934, when Stiebel presented his collection in the United States in a tour backed by a number of prestigious department stores, he constantly reiterated the fact that he did not cater to 'dowdy aristocratic debutantes, but quite the opposite [...] especially since London has become a great social centre; very gay, very smart and very amusing'.<sup>161</sup> He thereby used the changes in society to support his fashion credentials. The main image for *Life* magazine's coverage of the tour (Figure 12) in its depiction of the young designer in a simple, contemporary setting, surrounded by eight youthful models, presented what could be seen as a democratic view of London's dress culture. Six of the ensembles were eveningwear; streamlined and slim fitting with fashionable capes, butterfly sleeves, corsages and bows. The daywear consisted of bright delicately printed silks with jaunty 'Robin Hood' hats. Such designs challenged American expectations of English tailored daywear and formal evening dress; particularly the latter's traditional association with the grandeur of stiff satins and low décolletage to show off the jewels of society ladies. An understanding of London as a modern, vibrant and international social centre therefore became an important promotional narrative that underpinned Stiebel's design aesthetic and authority in America. In turn he used this to support his representation as a creative fashion designer whose work was applicable across a wide market.

Transcripts of the lectures Stiebel delivered whilst in America provide evidence of how he both challenged Paris' design hegemony and drew on the rhetoric of originality to present a romantic notion of his artistic creativity.<sup>162</sup> They show that he represented himself as a fashion creator who gained inspiration not from others but from his personal siphoning of the modern world. This is demonstrated in *The New York Times* article, 'An Englishman's Idea' from November 1934, which quoted Stiebel's declaration that due to an international 'smart set' of women there was now:

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<sup>160</sup> Ross, 2003, p.35

<sup>161</sup> 'An Englishman's Idea: Victor Stiebel, Here on a visit, Says That Modern Style is International,' *The New York Times*, 18 November 1934 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>162</sup> The transcripts are held in Adrian Woodhouse's personal archive of Stiebel's correspondence, writings, designs and photographs. That he delivered these in America is proved by their quotation in newspaper articles.



Figure 12: Victor Stiebel, Head Fitter and Models, *Life* Magazine, September 1934

No nationalism in dress for the truly modern woman, her individualism finds expression in the same way in all countries. There is nothing strictly English, nothing strictly French [...] just the smart woman selecting her apparel with intelligence and good taste according to the style of the day. And in turn, we who design these for her are influenced by the times in which we live – the youth, the excitement, and the movement of present-day life. All this shows itself in rhythm of line, beauty of texture and subtlety of coloring.<sup>163</sup>

In the interwar period the narrative of internationalism, just as it was in architectural debates, was a key component within the dissemination of not only English but also French couture. For example, Lucien Lelong (the French Couturier), in a question and answer session with the American Fashion Group (a body that will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2) three years earlier, in response to whether he designed and thought about the American buyer and the American point of view, promoted a similar narrative in his claim that ‘there is no American woman, there is no French woman, there is no Spanish woman. There is only one woman and the woman who has got chic is that woman. And the chic woman has got no nationality. [...] I am influenced by what I see today’.<sup>164</sup> The narrative of fashion promoted by these designers and magazines such as *Vogue* therefore rejected national inflections, which in turn allowed scope for the recognition of the London couturiers’ creative autonomy and broadened the market scope and applicability of their design style.

The ‘smart’ or ‘chic’ woman,’ who both Stiebel and Lelong promoted as the archetypal couture client, was clearly a member of the international ‘smart set’: a rising phenomenon in the interwar period, given particular agency not only by developments in the speed and reliability of transatlantic travel, but also by the growth of newspaper gossip columns and fashion publications with international editions; such as *Vogue* and its rival *Harper’s Bazaar*. The world of fashion that such magazines constructed was one of independently wealthy pleasure seekers that stretched across national boundaries and united wealthy consumers. Their pages were dominated by fashionable international figures such as Lady Mendl, Daisy Fellowes, Lady Diana Cooper, Wallace Simpson, Mrs. Leo d’Erlanger, Lady Jersey and Edwina Mountbatten. These were extremely wealthy women, who by the 1930s not only socialized but also purchased their clothes in London, Paris and New York. Caroline Seeböhm (the biographer of *Vogue*’s publisher

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<sup>163</sup> ‘An Englishman’s Idea: Victor Stiebel, Here on a visit, Says That Modern Style is International,’ *The New York Times*, 18 November 1934 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>164</sup> FGIR, Box 72

Condé Nast) has pointed out that one of the key strengths of the magazine's three international editions was their ability to chronicle such 'celebrity socialites on seemingly permanent vacation in page after page of photographs and chatter about Americans abroad and Europeans in New York'.<sup>165</sup> This constructed an understanding of the fashionable woman as 'equally at home in an English country house, a Paris salon, or a New York nightclub'.<sup>166</sup> Society women, with the money and leisure to predicate their lives on travel, therefore acted as conduits that connected these separate fashion arenas and the designers of London, Paris and New York through a shared community of standards, tastes and interests.

The role such magazines and their depiction of fashionable society played in the construction of the high fashion industry and the connection of separate markets in Britain, France and America cannot be underestimated. *Vogue*, for example, was the first publication to create international editions tailored to foreign markets, which thrived not as export magazines but as native periodicals.<sup>167</sup> By the late 1920s it was one of the top three magazines read by upper and middle class British women. It was not just society women who read *Vogue* but also clothing producers and department store buyers. For example, by the 1930s Macy's of New York was buying 100 copies of the American edition per month for its staff.<sup>168</sup> It had therefore become a 'byword for fashion and key stakeholder able to both shape and influence the international fashion industry'.<sup>169</sup> The business historians Howard Cox and Simon Mowatt posit the source of this success in *Vogue's* innovative business model; the 'class publication', which they argue revolutionized the British magazine industry in the interwar period and made *Vogue* not only highly profitable, but also 'able to authentically influence British women's fashion decisions [... as its management and editorial departments] went from being passive commentators to active participants in the fashion and apparel industries'.<sup>170</sup> The idea of a 'class publication' was based on the production of a low volume, high quality consumer magazine, which drew revenue from advertisers rather than sales. Commercial success was not based on large circulation figures but on advertising

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<sup>165</sup> Caroline Seeböhm, *The Man Who Was Vogue: The Life and Times of Condé Nast* (New York: The Viking Press, 1982), p.142

<sup>166</sup> Seeböhm, 1982, p.142

<sup>167</sup> Kerstan Cohen, *International Directory of Corporate Histories* (The Condé Nast Publications Inc. Gale Virtual Reference Library, 2004)

<sup>168</sup> Seeböhm, 1982, p. 120

<sup>169</sup> Cynthia, L. White, *Women's Magazines 1693 – 1968* (London: Michael Joseph, 1970) and Seeböhm, 1982, p. 120

<sup>170</sup> Howard Cox and Simon Mowatt, 'Creating Images of Fashion: Consumer Magazines and American Competition in Britain, 1910 – 1940,' *Business and Economic History On Line*, January 2009

revenue, which in turn depended on the magazine's ability to link advertisers of high-end goods to an affluent target market. The marketing strategy of the 'class publication' therefore relied on the ability to understand and reach a select readership. *Vogue* maintained a strict policy that separated advertising from editorial, as its unique appeal rested on its seemingly authentic and unbiased knowledge of fashion. Throughout the interwar period *Vogue* was consequently dependent on access to fashionable society in order to verify its own relevance. This strategy is exemplified in both the magazine's editorial policy, which ensured that each edition contained a minimum of two 'society' photographs and in the predominance of the 'Our Lives Day to Day' column, which documented the lives and fashions of a select elite. As a result, an internationally constituted social elite, which was both fashion conscious and highly visible, performed an integral role not only within the validation of fashion journalism and its images but also within a city's designation as a fashion centre.

What can be seen as *Vogue's* process of authentication of its fashion authority is made particularly obvious in the work of the English photographer Cecil Beaton, whose gossip columns, drawings and romantic portraits of society women were ubiquitous in this magazine throughout the 1930s. What separated this photographer from many of his contemporaries, and made him indispensable to *Vogue*, was his insider knowledge of the idiosyncrasies of fashionable society. A similar mechanism operated within the validation of the creative agency of Victor Stiebel, who found it equally important to trade on his links to high society. For example, in 1933 to mark the start of the Season, he held a 'Midnight Party' at his dress house, where he also presented a small collection of his latest models to a carefully selected group of invited guests, which included Nancy Mitford, Lady Oppenheimer and Anne Armstrong Jones. *Vogue* immediately produced a full-page feature on the event and described it as a 'charming, intimate affair' hosted for 'intelligent Mayfair' (Figure 13).<sup>171</sup> Intimate it may have been, but as with many such ventures, this was a public and commercial display of intimacy and belonging. It not only allowed a sense of voyeurism into an elite world, but the informality of the richly attired guests, seated on the floor, or perched on sofa arms, further legitimised both Stiebel's and *Vogue's* fashion credentials.

The documentation of Stiebel's 'party' alongside the escapades of London society effectively blurred the line between fashion and gossip writing. The cultural

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<sup>171</sup> 'Victor Stiebel's Midnight Party, 22 Bruton Street', *British Vogue*, April 1933, p. 78





Figure 13:  
'Victor Stiebel's Midnight Party, 22 Bruton Street'  
*British Vogue*,  
April 1933, p.37

theorist Kristen Hoganson has argued that this form of journalism, 'not only made the imagined world of fashion seem more tangible by providing distinctive personas to emblemize it, [... but also] enabled the women who followed the fashionable world to buy the connotations along with the clothes, and foremost among the connotations were aristocracy and wealth'.<sup>172</sup> Caroline Seeböhm has also shown that, in the interwar period, the editors of *Vogue* considered the English 'the height of fashion, particularly if they had titles'.<sup>173</sup> In the context of the magazine's business model, which was based on social aspiration, it is unsurprising that the English aristocrat and her social circle constituted an integral part of the fashion industry's authentication process: as a title automatically transferred the much needed connotations of status, wealth and belonging. Thus, within the representational world of fashion magazines, which exerted considerable influence over the fashion industry, Britain's traditional social structure gave both London and its designers a symbolic niche.

In the interwar period the British aristocracy and its social sphere therefore maintained a strong representational appeal, despite its decline in terms of real economic and political power. Those with titles were influential, but they also had to have a developed sense of celebrity and be well disposed to public scrutiny. Consequently, for the London couturiers it was advantageous that many of the titled members of London Society were not only more open to fashionable dress but also to placing themselves and their wardrobes on public display. It has been argued that the final element in the transformation of London society in the interwar period was this reconstitution of 'old money into new celebrity'.<sup>174</sup> This was facilitated by the ubiquitous interest paid to its members not only by class publications such as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* but also throughout all levels of the national magazine and newspaper industry. As Paul Cohen-Portheim noted in 1931:

The interest, which the whole nation takes in Society, is astonishing. In continental countries for all their snobisme and reverence for the nobility, the masses know very little about the best people, who remain private individuals; in England people in Society are public characters. Every newspaper tells you about their private lives, every illustrated paper is perpetually publishing photographs of them and they are as much popular figures as cinema-actors are. Their parties and their

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<sup>172</sup> Kristen Hoganson, 'The Fashionable World: Imagined Communities of Dress', in *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation*, edited by Antoinette Burton (Duke University Press, 2003) pp.260 – 278, (265)

<sup>173</sup> Seeböhm, 1982, p.77

<sup>174</sup> Ross, 2003, p. 41

dressess, their weddings, christenings and funerals, their houses and their travels are all described and depicted. It great public simply demands it [...] the first duty of society is to be a show for the masses, particularly during the three months of the London Season, when it has not a moment's rest.<sup>175</sup>

At the centre of the increased publicity that surrounded elite society was the young debutante. In the 1930s this was supported by the propensity of the daughters of the aristocracy and their peers to put themselves on display as never before. Many of these young women were also not averse to the use of public interest for commercial gain. For example, Lady Marguerite Strickland (a debutante in 1931) promoted 'everything from Kirby grips to Gordon's gin' and became one of the key models for the British off-the-peg fashion brand Matita (Figure 14).<sup>176</sup> As Margaret Whigham (the 'Debutante of the Year' in 1931) pointed out:

[Before her generation] the prevailing image of the debutante was that of a painfully shy mouse, lacking both make-up and conversation. Suddenly and unaccountably, all this changed. The girls of 1930 had good looks; they knew how to dress; and they had far more self-confidence than their predecessors. The Press were quick to swoop on this new development. Suddenly newspapers began to 'feature' us. For the first time, debutantes became front-page news along with royalty, politicians and actresses.<sup>177</sup>

The interest taken in Whigham and her contemporaries may have appeared sudden, but with the blurring of the boundaries of elite society and the interest taken in it by an expanding publishing industry, it was certainly not unaccountable. The fact that debutante clothing was one of the main components within Stiebel's design practice was therefore fortuitous, as a main impulse within fashion design in the interwar period was the ability to capture an element of youth and modernity. In his unpublished memoirs, Stiebel went so far as to credit the patronage of Margaret Whigham, the 'most beautiful woman of her generation', for the 'sudden success' of his business.<sup>178</sup> Daughter of George Whigham, the self-made founder of the British and Canadian Celanese Corporation, she was launched as a debutante in an extravagant coming-out ball in 1931. In the early 1930s, she was one of London's youngest and most fashionable socialites and a particularly popular and influential personality in newspaper gossip

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<sup>175</sup> Paul Cohen-Portheim, (trans. Allen Harris) *England the Unknown Isle* (E.P. Dutton & Co. 1931) p. 113

<sup>176</sup> Juliet Gardiner, *The Thirties: An Intimate History* (Harper Collins, 2010) p. 623

<sup>177</sup> Duchess of Argyll, 1977, p. 46.

<sup>178</sup> Stiebel, *Unpublished Memoirs*, Private Archive of Adrian Woodhouse



Figure 14: (Top) Lady Margaret Strickland (debutante in 1931) in advertisement for the ready-to wear brand Matita. Photographer Norman Parkinson

Figure 15: (Bottom)  
Charles Sweeny's and Margaret Whigham's Wedding, Unknown  
photographer, 21 February 1933

columns. For example, in 1933, when she married Charles Sweeney in a Norman Hartnell gown, (Figure 15) the *Sunday Dispatch* reported that in the crowd of 3,000 spectators who gathered outside Brompton Oratory were 'scores of young women who had obviously modelled their appearance on hers. They had long earrings, full, rich cupid bow lips, and tiny hats aslant, as "The Whigham" wears them'.<sup>179</sup> This report suggests that the attention Whigham received within the national press made her style a source of fashion authority for a broad market and not simply her own peer group and by extension brought authentication to the creative autonomy of the designers she patronised.

Before her marriage, *The Bystander* reported that Whigham was 'quite the smartest *jeune fille* London has seen for a long time. Her clothes are original, do not depend entirely on their cost, and she wears them with great chic'.<sup>180</sup> This acknowledgement of the style and cost of her wardrobe clearly made reference to her patronage of English designers; who charged considerably less for their models than those from Paris. Whigham's patriotic consumption habits were therefore well documented in the press. It is clear that she also had a developed sense of the value of her personal endorsement as after his first collection Stiebel claimed she 'struck a deal' with him that 'if he gave her his personal attention, if she had the best fitters and was never overcharged she would buy his clothes, and tell her friends about them'.<sup>181</sup> The fruitfulness of this client endorsement is clearly demonstrated in an article taken from *The Sun* newspaper from later that year, which described Whigham as 'dressed almost exclusively by Stiebel, whose fashion salon in Berkeley Square is the rendezvous for London's smartest and loveliest women'.<sup>182</sup> Stiebel's recollection of this collaboration was that afterwards 'everyone wished to know where "The Whigham" shopped and as soon as she wore my clothes, women stampeded to my collections'.<sup>183</sup> This was however a simplification of the process of emulation, as it concealed the business acumen behind this endorsement, which was a far more complicated public relations exercise. This is illustrated by one of the first garments Whigham purchased from Stiebel's second collection; a distinctive striped dress worn with a beret hat that clearly demonstrates how this backing was engineered for its maximum commercial impact. In the same month that she appeared in the dress socially and was photographed in it, Stiebel not only used this model in his advertising campaign but also supplied it to both

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<sup>179</sup> 'Almost in Confidence', *The Sunday Dispatch*, 26 February 1933

<sup>180</sup> *Bystander* article quoted in Argyll, 1977, p.46

<sup>181</sup> Victor Stiebel, *Unpublished Memoirs*

<sup>182</sup> *The Sun*, December 1932

<sup>183</sup> Victor Stiebel, *Unpublished Memoirs*

the daughter of the First Lord of the Admiralty for a *Vogue* photo-shoot and for the leading lady's costume in a much-publicised theatre production (Figure 16 to 18).

This multi-layered promotional activity is an indication of how Stiebel as a young designer manipulated this particular client's patronage and newsworthiness to achieve maximum publicity. The suggestion that wealthy women chose Stiebel's clothes merely because Whigham was a client disguises the industrious and multifaceted nature of this carefully executed promotion. The marketing strategy that surrounded Whigham's patronage is also indicative of the importance not only of a fashionable clientele and social arena for display but also a sophisticated network of mediation that incorporated fashion magazines, newspaper reports, advertising campaigns and theatre productions.

London presented not only a viable market for the consumption of fashionable goods but also offered a distinctive and effective platform for the display and promotion of its designers' products. For that reason, it was fortunate for both purveyors of luxury goods and services and those involved in the mediation of fashion that the interwar period saw a rise in highly visible socializing. The social historian Ross McKibbin has noted that at this point Society was a class that was defined by itself and others by 'its public display'.<sup>184</sup> Nowhere was this more epitomized than in the increased extravagance of the parties organised by competitive social hostesses, which supported the growth of an array of luxury businesses that catered to Society's propensity for display. The biographer Sue Shephard has shown that in the case of Constance Spry, (the florist who dominated the market for flower decorations for London Society in the 1930s), her 'artistic' business 'relied on the wealth of patrons; on their glamorous lifestyle, their tight knit milieu and their competitive socializing'.<sup>185</sup> In a talk, given to the American Fashion Group in 1939, Spry herself pointed out that she had never felt the need to advertise her business as it 'was made successful by my friends'.<sup>186</sup> She claimed that the only purely promotional work she ever undertook was a combined show with Stiebel called 'Flowers and Clothes' in 1935, where the dresses and their textiles were inspired by her floral displays.<sup>187</sup> The 'friends' she referred to were not her clients

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<sup>184</sup> McKibbin, 1998, p. 2. For further information on the commercial stimulus provided by a growth in extravagant parties see Shephard, 2011, p. 127

<sup>185</sup> Shephard, 2011, p. 119

<sup>186</sup> Constance Spry, *Fashion Group Bulletin*, May 1939. (FGIR, Box 72 F.3)

<sup>187</sup> Spry claimed that the 'Flowers and Clothes' show was a 'huge success with an attendance of nearly 800 people.' This event led to British *Vogue's* 'Flower Edition' 20 March 1935



Figure 16: (Top) Margaret Whigham, October 1932, photographed by Bassano

Figure 17: (Bottom Left) Stiebel Advert 1932

Figure 18: (Bottom Right) 'The Morning in Town', Vogue, October 1932

but an inter-connected group of creative practitioners in the fields of fashion, theatre, photography, magazine publishing, interior decoration, architecture and catering whose commissions and recommendations garnered her clients and prestige. Stiebel was also firmly ensconced within this network of aesthetic businesses. This is demonstrated not only by the prevalence of Spry's flower arrangements at his dress shows, but most specifically by the fact that in 1935 he and Spry became reciprocal directors of each other's companies.<sup>188</sup> It is evident that personal contacts allowed Stiebel to construct a mutually supportive network that validated his claims to creative agency. Much of this stemmed from his initial friendship with the interior decorator Syrie Maugham, who designed both his salon and his home, and also introduced him to Spry and many other contacts such as the textile designer Marion Dorn who designed the rugs for his showroom, Cecil Beaton who featured his clothes in his society portraits and the theatre and events designer Oliver Messel who facilitated important commissions particularly for costume balls.

Alongside the extravagant parties devised by socially ambitious hostesses, the charity ball, a ubiquitous phenomenon between the wars, provided many creative practitioners with an extremely visible platform for extravagant and spectacular display. Whilst usually devised by an upper class committee, this type of event has been described as one of London's more 'genuinely democratic institutions [... as] social mixing was part of the appeal of such functions'.<sup>189</sup> Charity balls can thus be taken as representative of the modernization of London society. These were fundraising events where formality was removed, frivolity and social mixing encouraged and visual flamboyance and public display the expectation. The balls often demanded themed dress and décor and in so doing they had a notable impact on the careers of many of London's creative practitioners. A pertinent example is that of the society photographer Madame Yevonde. Alongside Beaton, her informal portrait style is indicative of how the social changes of the interwar period led to a more relaxed and playful representation of society, which in turn supported the development of a London couture industry. It was her most famous series of photographs produced for the exhibition *Goddesses and Others*, which points to the role costume balls could play in the advancement of a creative career. Her photographs for this exhibition drew primarily on the costumes

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<sup>188</sup> Shephard, 2011, p.183

<sup>189</sup> Ross, 2003, p. 40





Figure 19: Lady Dorothy Etta Warrender as Ceres by Madame Yevonde, 1935

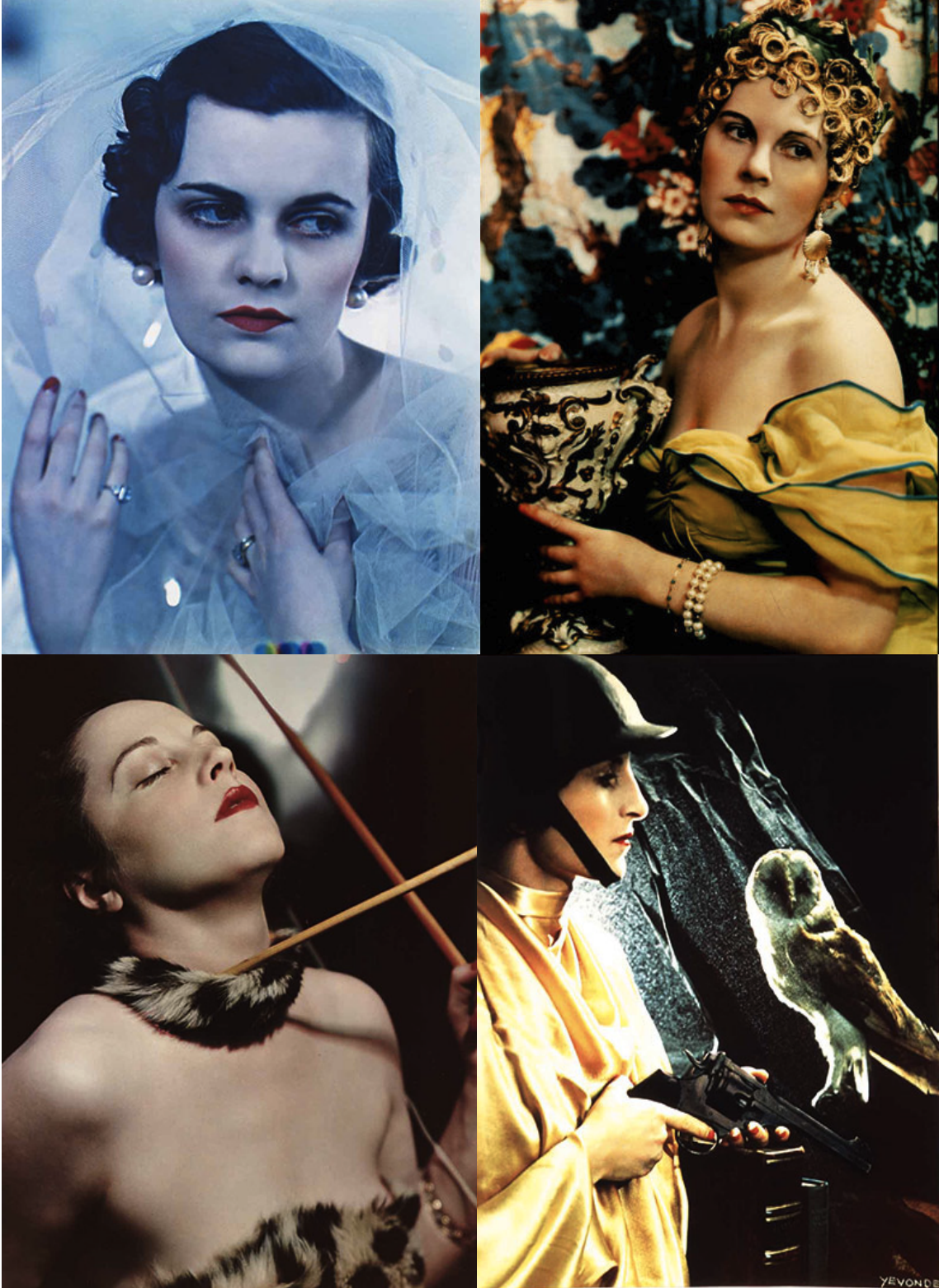


Figure 20: (Top Left) Margaret Sweeney (nee Whigham) as Helen of Troy  
 (Top Right) Lady Alexandra Haig (Baroness Dacre) as Circe,  
 (Bottom Left) Lady Milbanke as Penthelisa, Queen of the Amazon  
 (Bottom Right) Lady Michael Balcon as Minerva.

created for the fundraising *Olympian Party* (Figure 19 & Figure 20) held at Claridge's hotel in 1935. Yevonde photographed nineteen of London's most fashionable women, who received the most attention in magazine and newspaper columns in the 1930s and all of whom were clients of the London couturiers.<sup>190</sup>

Such charity balls offered a similar opportunity to London's creative dressmakers, as they allowed them to not only garner publicity and new clients but also extend and display their creative talents (Figure 21). In December 1933, for instance, *The Bystander* magazine dedicated five pages to images of the guests' costumes for an *Edwardian Ball* held in aid of Queen Charlotte's Maternity Hospital. The main focus of this article was the gowns Stiebel provided for guests such as Lady Warrender, Mrs. Sacheverell Sitwell and Mrs Zita James. In a section entitled 'Which Period Do You Prefer?' an image of Stiebel's reproduction of a 1903 gown for the Countess of Warwick, was placed next to one of a model from his latest collection.<sup>191</sup> Whilst the sketches and photograph of his current fashion models were streamlined in comparison to those of his ball costumes, elements of Edwardian dress clearly informed his contemporary designs (Figure 22). Many press reports of Stiebel's Spring/Summer Collection of 1934, comment on how he then went on to use 'the colours and stylistic tropes of the past in his modern dresses'.<sup>192</sup> As one provincial journalist put it, 'we should have been incredulous a year or two ago if we had been told [...] material and colours, which are ghosts of the nineteenth century – would make a modern frock'.<sup>193</sup> Newspaper commentators may have feigned surprise at Stiebel's aesthetic mixture of the past and present, yet what they saw as his unconventional approach was taken as an indication of his ability to innovate new styles. In this way, costume balls provided not only women 'with an opportunity, however fleeting, to transcend the limits, which the dictates of their dress culture imposed' but also allowed scope for London's fashionable dressmakers to extend their design repertoire and creative range.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> They were: Margaret Sweeney (Whigham) as Helen of Troy, Mrs James Beck as Daphne, Mrs Richard Hart Davis as Andromeda and Ariel, Miss Susan Bigh as Calypso, Mrs Longdon as Persephone, Lady Dorothy Warrender as Ceres, Mary Viscountess Ratendone as Euterpe, Lady Milibanke as Penthesilea Queen of the Amazons, Mrs Edward Mayer as Medusa, Lady Diana Mosely as Venus, Countess of Shrewsbury as Ariadne, Mrs Anthony Eden as Clio the muse of history, Lady Michael Balcon as Minerva, Lady Bridgett Poulett as Arethusa, Lady Anne Rhys as Flora, Eileen Hunter (Mrs Ward Jackson) as Dido, Dorothy Duchess of Wellington as Hecate, Baroness Gagem as Europa, Lady Alexandra Haigh (later Lady Dacre) as Circe.

<sup>191</sup> 'Which Period Do You Prefer?' *The Bystander*, 13 December 1933 (VSPB/AAD/1994)

<sup>192</sup> 'Back to Victoria', *Yorkshire Post*, 7 April 1934 (VSPB/AAD/1994)

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>194</sup> Cynthia Cooper, 'Dressing Up: A Consuming Passion' in *Fashion: A Canadian Perspective*, edited by Alexandra Palmer (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 43



Figure 21: (Top) 'Lady Warrender in Stiebel's recreation of 1908 fashion for Edwardian Ball, *Vogue*, November 1933

Figure 22: (Bottom) 'Which Period Do You Prefer', *The Bystander*, 13 December, 1933

Left: Victor Stiebel model and sketches for his collection. Right: The Countess of Warwick, in her gown created by Stiebel for The Edwardian Ball



Gowns worn at costume balls and historically informed modern fashions obviously responded to a different mood in London's interwar social scene, which at times seemed to be haunted by the past. Yet the fashions these produced supported rather than undermined the English couturiers' claim to contemporary relevance. These styles of dress can be seen to align with what the art and literary historian Alexandra Harris describes as the 'romantic modern' aesthetic prevalent in England in the interwar period; an idiosyncratic brand of nostalgic modernity, which she argues was characteristic of the age.<sup>195</sup> Rather than a deferral of the modern, Harris sees the tendency of artists and designers to refer to the past as a quintessential and defining element within English modernity. Harris argues that the nostalgic aesthetic of the 1930s was neither anachronistic nor conventional, but was recognised at the time as novel, young and non-conformist. In particular she points to the safeguarding of eighteenth century heritage that characterised fashionable English style at this point where, 'the experts in the distinctive art of Georgian re-creation, such as Cecil Beaton and his circle, young aesthetes, people of extremes, flaunted both their modernity and their anachronism'.<sup>196</sup> Stiebel's position within this distinctive aesthetic circle, which was representative of a specific fashionable upper class youth and their modernity, is clearly demonstrated by the clothes he produced for his 'friends' in the short-lived Eighteenth Century Equestrian Group (Figure 23), which included Beaton, Lady Castlerosse, Lady Weymouth and Nancy Mitford. The clothes he designed for these modern anachronists were featured in many magazines, such as *The Bystander* and *Vogue* (Figure 24).<sup>197</sup> Similarly, the celebration of Victoriana, which Harris contends was another example of young modern rebellion, gained no greater prominence than in the clothes Norman Hartnell created for the Queen's 1939 state visit to Paris.<sup>198</sup> The renowned 'White Collection', famously photographed by Cecil Beaton (Figure 25), may have adopted the style of the most romantic and sentimental of Victorian painters, Franz Winterhalter, yet

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<sup>195</sup> Alexandra Harris, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (Thames and Hudson, 2010)

<sup>196</sup> Harris, 2010, p.75

<sup>197</sup> His connection to Viscountess Castlerosse was a particularly important one for the dissemination of Stiebel's name, not only in *Vogue* where she featured in his eighteenth century hunting costume, but also within the national press: for at the time her husband wrote the most informed and influential 'Londoner's Log' gossip column for Lord Beaverbrook's *Sunday Express*. Viscount Castlerosse was the first member of the aristocracy to write a gossip column. As a member of society, his 3,000 word weekly column was compulsory reading for high society. For more information on his career see Andrew Barrow, *Gossip 1920 – 1970* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1978) p.119

<sup>198</sup> For further information of the importance of this commission for Beaton, Hartnell and the visual representation of the Queen, see Hugo Vickers, *Elizabeth, the Queen Mother* (London: Arrow Books, 2006) p.178



Figure 23: (Top) *The Eighteenth Century Equestrian Group* in costumes by Victor Stiebel. Left to Right - Hon. Nancy Mitford, Mr. Cecil Beaton, Lady Castlerosse and Lady Weymouth, *The Bystander*, 17 May 1938

Figure 24: (Bottom) Viscountess Castlerosse in 'hunting costume of an eighteenth century lady of fashion' designed by Victor Stiebel, photographed by Cecil Beaton for *British Vogue* 1938



Figure 25: Queen Elizabeth in Hartnell's 'White Collection' designed for the state visit to Paris in 1939, Photographed by Cecil Beaton

as Harris argues the appropriation of styles from the Victorian era was not seen as conservative or a rejection of modernity.<sup>199</sup> It is in such hybrid-modern designs, where late Victorian styles constituted modern dress or designs were informed by a bygone aristocratic age, that English designers were able to tap into a wider elite, fashionable aesthetic that correlated with the impulses of English modernity. The combination, of romantic, historical styles mixed with modern elements may also have been an aesthetic that dominated many Parisian designers' collections in the 1930s, however, when such clothes were produced in England, they and their designers demonstrated a nationally specific, culturally astute, class-based design authority.<sup>200</sup> In so doing, the clothes produced linked designers such as Stiebel and Hartnell within a definable aesthetic network that endorsed their cultural capital and claims of fashion innovation.

The vibrancy of the theatre in London's West End, alongside social events such as charity balls, offered yet another platform for the demonstration of a designer's cultural relevance and creativity. Whilst today, costume and fashion are often seen as distinct forms of design, in the 1930s they were inextricably linked. By the interwar period the showcase of new fashions had become paramount within many theatre performances and costume design became an integral component within the business practices of many in the 'new school of English fashion design'. It is therefore unsurprising, that letters in his private archive demonstrate that when Stiebel opened his dress house he immediately wrote to London's main theatre impresario Sir Charles B. Cochran to offer his services as a costume designer.<sup>201</sup> Research shows that over the next two years he went on to design costumes for at least six of Cochran's stage productions, many of which transferred to New York and brought the designer a large amount of transatlantic attention. Cochran's productions were extravagant, popular and lucrative and Norman Hartnell, Stiebel's nearest competitor, had already costumed many of his performances (Figure 26). A main element of Cochran's repertoire was the elegant

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<sup>199</sup> Harris, 2010, p. 96

<sup>200</sup> This mixture of the past and present was also seen in the work of Paris-based couturiers such as Schiaparelli, Vionnet, Maggy Rouff and Mainbocher. Yet this mixture can be seen as particularly English. For example see the work of Design Historians who highlight the Janus-faced nature of British aesthetic modernism. For example, David Matless in 'Ages of English Design: Preservation, Modernism and Tales of their History, 1926 – 1939', *Journal of Design History*, III/4 (1990) p.203 – 12 shows how there was a clear sense of continuum between the past and present in British design, while Cheryl Buckley points to the number of 'modernisms' within British design in the 1930s and shows that modernity was not deferred but renegotiated in a number of ways, Buckley, 2007, p. 83

<sup>201</sup> Stiebel was fortunate that one of his first clients was Cochran's wife, who endorsed his letter of introduction to her husband. A letter Cochran sent back to Stiebel stated, 'I had no idea that it would interest you to do costumes, although I am certain you would do them very successfully. Next time I am doing a play, which calls for them I shall ask you to try your hand'. Charles B. Cochran, letter to Victor Stiebel, 11 October 1933 (Property of Adrian Woodhouse)





Figure 26: Examples of the styles included in Cochran's Revues.  
 (Top) Cochran inspecting Hartnell's costumes 1937  
 (Bottom) Oliver Messel's all-white design for Cochran's production of Offenbach's 'Helen!', Adelphi Theatre 1932

and stylish Revue: a medley of sketches and musical numbers based on wit, charm and pace. These productions were an important site of female-centred amusement, which indulged their audiences' need for pleasure and escape and became an integral part of the social season. In the interwar period Cochran also acted as a fulcrum within a specific network of cultural producers. His shows attracted some of the era's best creative talents, such as, Ivor Novello, Cole Porter, Paul Nash, Lovat Fraser, Frederick Ashton, Oliver Messel, George Balanchine and the Diaghilev ballet company.<sup>202</sup> In the 1930s the field of London theatre was therefore a particularly vibrant one. Stiebel's work for Cochran further established him within an important network of creative practitioners and allowed him to publicize his clothes and name to prospective clients, whilst it also supported his claim of aesthetic autonomy.

The costumes Stiebel created for productions such as *Music in the Air* (which opened in May 1933, with set designs by Oliver Messel), with their oversized gathered sleeves, bows around the neck and gauntlet gloves, were exaggerated and distinctive (Figure 27). Through performance and the associated publicity, these designs were quickly disseminated through a range of media, to become a design motif associated with Stiebel across a broad market.<sup>203</sup> For example, Mary Ellis, (the leading lady of *Music in the Air*) featured in her Stiebel costume (Figure 28), with its exaggerated fur shoulders, on the front cover of *Tatler* magazine in June 1933. She also wore another of his flamboyant designs for a nationally disseminated advert for the breakfast cereal Shredded Wheat (Figure 29). Many magazines, such as *The Sphere* and *The Bystander*, which were read by fashionable society, also carried production shots and long reviews. These different promotional platforms for this particular theatre production disseminated Stiebel's name and fashion authority across an extended consumer market not only in Britain, but also (when it transferred to Broadway) in America.

These designs, particularly their heavy butterfly shoulders, have clear similarities with ones seen the previous year in both Paris and Hollywood. They are comparable to

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<sup>202</sup> For more details of his career see his autobiography; Charles B. Cochran, *'Cock-A-Doodle-Do'* (J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1941) Ivor Novello (1895 – 1951, Welsh Composer and Actor, one of Britain's most popular entertainers of the early C20th), Cole Porter (1891 – 1964, Popular American composer and songwriter), Paul Nash (1889 – 1946, British surrealist painter and war artist), Lovat Fraser (1890 - 1921, English artist, designer and author), Frederick Ashton (1904 - 1988, British Ballet choreographer), Oliver Messel (1904 - 1978, English stage designer) George Balanchine (1904 – 1983, American contemporary ballet choreographer).

<sup>203</sup> 'Fashion Calling ... A Few Camera Studies of Victor Stiebel's Striking Clothes designed for "Music in the Air", *The Bystander*, 24 May 1933 (VSPA/ADD/1994)

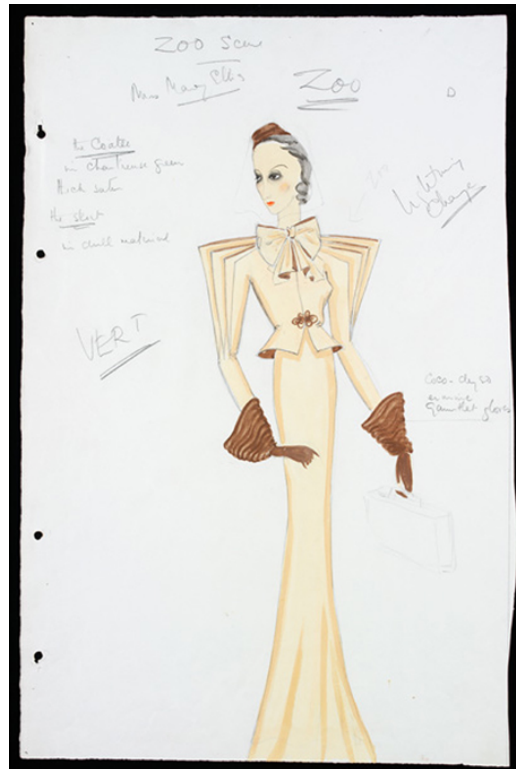


Figure 27: (Top) Victor Stiebel's Designs for Cochran's 'Music in the Air' May 1933  
(Bottom) Costumes designed by Victor Stiebel *The Bystander*, 18 May 1933



Figure 28: (Left) Mary Ellis in Victor Stiebel Design, Front cover *The Tatler*, June 1933  
 Figure 29: (Right) Mary Ellis in Victor Stiebel Design, from 'Music in the Air' Shredded Wheat Advert 1933



those shown, in 1932 in both the Parisian couturier Mainbocher's collection and the Hollywood designer Adrian's costume for Joan Crawford in the film *Letty Lynton* (Figure 31 and 32).<sup>204</sup> However, when Stiebel transferred elements of these costume designs into his fashion collections, despite such obvious similarities to these previous examples, they operated as a validation of his creative autonomy as press reports indicate that these models were then no longer compared to the work of others. The theatre presented a dynamic and creative environment, so whilst Stiebel's designs may not have been entirely original they captured and exaggerated a modern aesthetic of the day and demonstrated his design versatility and contemporary relevance. The provision of theatre costumes therefore not only operated as a promotional strategy but also allowed Stiebel to extricate himself from the production of conservative, socially specific dress, which in turn extended both his sartorial field and authority.

Historians have noted the support the West End's many theatres had offered to the city's dressmakers since the 1890s, so the provision of costumes by a London dressmaker was not new, but continued a well-established custom.<sup>205</sup> By the interwar period there was an expectation that actresses in performances that called for contemporary dress wore the latest styles by London's most influential designers. For an emergent couturier such as Stiebel, his theatre work not only acted as promotional introduction to an audience of potential clients but also validated his claims for cultural and contemporary relevance. Evidence of the theatre's cultural standing at this point is demonstrated in the pages of *Vogue*, which paid constant attention to the theatre as a site of contemporary fashion spectacle yet largely ignored film, at a point when Hollywood glamour filled the pages of mass publications.<sup>206</sup> In this context, the provision of costumes for the must-see theatre productions of the social season by London couturiers such as Stiebel can be seen as part of a larger reciprocal relationship of

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<sup>204</sup> For a discussion of the importance of the Letty Lynton dress within fashion history see Christopher Breward, *Fashion* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) pp. 136 - 138

<sup>205</sup> For further details on the links between the development of mannequin parades and theatre see Caroline Evans, 'Multiple, Movement, Model, Mode', in *Fashion and Modernity*, edited by Christopher Breward and Caroline Evans (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005) pp.125 -145. For further details of the development of named dressmakers working for the London stage see Joel Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, *Theatre and Fashion: From Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Michael Sanderson, *From Irving to Oliver: A Social History of the Acting Profession in England 1880 – 1983* (London: Althone Press, 1984), Christopher Breward, 'Ambiguous Role Models: Fashion, Modernity and the Victorian Actress', in *Fashion and Modernity*, edited by Breward and Evans, 2005, pp.101 – 120

<sup>206</sup> British *Vogue* was particularly careful in its use of English film actresses, for example, the analysis of the magazine throughout the 1930s shows that the only actresses it featured were Merle Oberon, Gertrude Lawrence and Vivienne Leigh: clients linked to Russell, Hartnell and Stiebel. Similarly in American *Vogue* Hollywood actresses were used sparingly, the most prominent was Carole Lombard (This information draws on a conversation with Rebecca Arnold on her research into American *Vogue*)



Figure 30: (Top) Victor Stiebel Design for 'Music in the Air' 1933  
 Figure 31: (Bottom Left) Adrian's design for Joan Crawford in 'Letty Lynton' 1932  
 Figure 32: (Bottom Right) Mainbocher Design, 1932

authentication within an era of rising mass production. For both 'class publications' such as *Vogue* and aspiring London couturiers, the theatre therefore operated as a particularly significant site, not only for the dissemination of new fashions but also for the validation of social and cultural significance.

To fully understand the networks that supported the construction of a London-based couture industry, the theatre offers an important example of the mutual benefits bestowed on different fields by the dressmakers' creative authority. For instance, when a couturier such as Stiebel operated as a costumier, he became part of what can be seen as a system of professionalisation for the practice of not only fashion but also theatre design. By dressing actresses for the stage, London couturiers not only gained commercial and creative advantage but also offered authentication to the creativity and cultural legitimacy of the theatre itself. In this case, rather than Stiebel, the Motley Theatre Design Group offers a even more pertinent example of this interconnectivity. In 1936 this Group (made up of the theatre designers Margaret and Sophie Harris and Elizabeth Wilmot) established the first theatre design course at the London Theatre Studio, whilst it also opened *Motley Couture* on Garrick Street. For the interior of their new dress house Motley commissioned the Bauhaus designer Marcel Breuer to create a clean-lined modern retail environment rather than a theatrical emporium (Figure 33). In so doing, Motley sought validation as couturiers, not only literally through the name of their business, but also by mimicking the aforementioned design strategies of dressmakers such as Stiebel.<sup>207</sup>

Theatre historians have noted the role Motley played within the professionalisation of theatre design as a practice, yet posit their engagement with couture production as a commercial side-line rather than an integral part of this process of creative validation.<sup>208</sup> It should however be recognised as part of a mutually reinforcing process for the cultural legitimacy of both fashion and costume design. The fact that the company was given the name *Motley Couture* highlights the interconnected benefits that a change from court dressmakers to couturiers could bring to other areas of creative activity. For the theatre, (as with the case of fashion publications such as *Vogue*), a recognizable London couture was part of a reciprocal relationship of authentication that reinforced claims of cultural taste and professional authority in a

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<sup>207</sup> In 1936 the London Theatre Studio opened, it was the first school to incorporate theatre design in its curriculum, the Motley Theatre Design Group took charge of the theatre design course. Sophie Harris made the main contribution to dress design and provided most of the designs for the Motley Couture label.

<sup>208</sup> Micheal Mullin, *Design by Motley* (Associated University Presses, 1996)

decade when the mass market witnessed a process, which the marketing expert Paul Cherington described as the 'democratization of things'.<sup>209</sup>

As part of this process of authentication and in order to validate both their own practices and a network of other fields, it was crucial that London's couturiers became well-known personalities in their own right. This was a clear element within Stiebel's promotional activity where his personality, youth and charm, as an embodiment of his practice, became an integral component of his marketing strategy. From very early in his career the mediation of his business focused not only on his work and the lives of his clients but also on his personal identity. An indicative example was a *Manchester Daily Sketch* journalist's claim that, 'this young designer is the most interesting man I have ever met with his witty, frighteningly-bright conversation, he is able to charm everyone [...] when he arrives, a dull party becomes electrified'.<sup>210</sup> Stiebel carefully mediated his own personality to encourage this type of coverage. For example, images of the designer at leisure, such as (Figure 34) of him exercising on the top of his business premises, were disseminated throughout the press and, by no small measure, helped to align his creations with a clear identity. When British *Vogue* launched its *House and Garden* supplement in February 1936, Stiebel was one of the first 'personalities' to invite the magazine into his home to discuss not only his clothes, but also his own taste and lifestyle (Figure 35). This aspect of 'personality advertising' mirrors the practice of stage actresses and movie stars who, as part of their carefully constructed public persona, also displayed their residences and by association their implicit good taste. This was also part of a public relations shift seen in New York and Paris to brand fashion products with a clearly identified designer. In this way Stiebel's presentation of himself as a creative couturier involved full engagement in the twentieth century's growing celebrity culture, part of an individualizing project that brought validation to many forms of production within a rising mass culture that was seen to destabilize social structures.<sup>211</sup>

When seen in a similar context, it is therefore significant that the London dressmakers gained professional recognition as couturiers at a time when a major increase occurred in mass production and consumption. The case study of Victor Stiebel highlights that his recognition as a creative London couturier brought prestige and

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<sup>209</sup> Paul T. Cherington, *People's Wants and How to Satisfy Them* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935) p. 173

<sup>210</sup> Melville-Brown, 'Most Interesting Man I Ever Met', *The Manchester Daily Sketch*, London, January 1938 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>211</sup> For further detail see many of the essays in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, edited by Christine Gledhill (London & New York: Routledge, 1991)





Figure 33: Motley Couture dress house, designed by Marcel Breuer, 1936

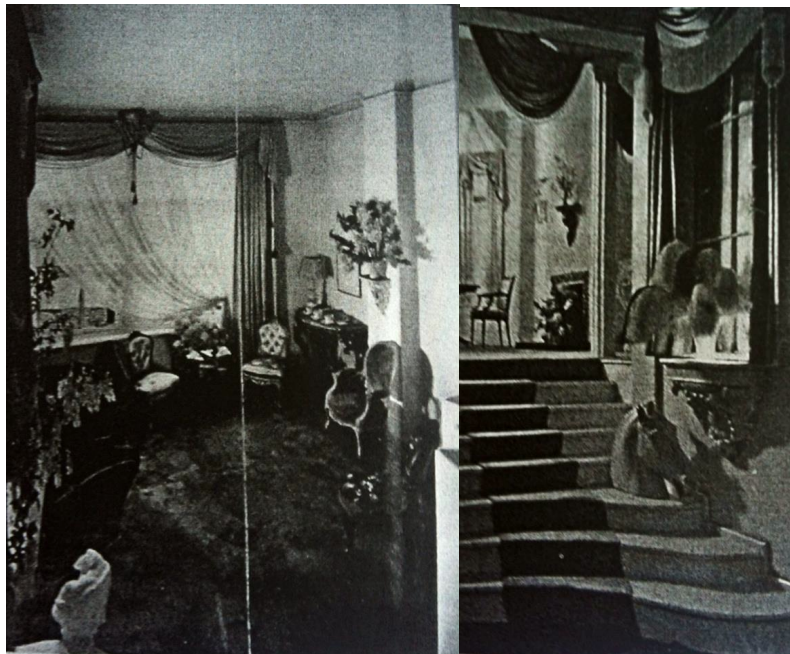


Figure 34: (Top) 'Its very different from designing gowns', *The Daily Sketch*, May 1936

Figure 35: (Bottom Right) Victor Stiebel's 'Romantic' new drawing room, *Vogue*, February 1936

(Bottom Left) Entrance to Victor Stiebel's drawing room, *Harper's Bazaar*, August 1936

cultural validation to his own practice, his clients and other fields such as the theatre and fashion publications and that in the 1930s London presented designers with an idiosyncratic social and cultural platform that could be manipulated to validate their creativity. This, in turn, shows that the benefits of a creative London couture industry were broader than merely the business success of a specific number of elite made-to-measure dressmakers.

### **1:3) 'A Solid Rock in the Midst of a Torrent': London Couture and The Projection of England**

Just imagine how excited everyone in London must be, and how gay the town is. I can hardly believe it [...] how dull it used to be before the war, just grand parties for the aristocracy and no fun and pleasure at all for the masses. But now London is Europe's merriest capital, with everyone sharing in the fun. And as for the clothes [...] it is incredible. No buyer ever dreamed of going over to London even to look at the models except for tailor-made suits, in which the English always excelled. But now every buyer from America takes in all the London openings as a matter of course, and dress models by Hartnell, Stiebel and other designers command as much respect, as do those of the French houses.<sup>212</sup>

In 1937, an American syndicated newspaper column, entitled 'Diary of a Fashion Model,' recognised London's newly established position as an important international fashion centre. This particular editorial worked on the premise that the writer, 'Grace,' was a mannequin in the dress shop of 'Madame' and wrote about the exclusive fashions she encountered. In this account, London was modern, exciting and fashionable and this impacted on the representation of its young dressmakers who in return gained creative credibility. The article (just one example of many produced in America at the time) may have reformulated the image of the internal workings of the country's social sphere and linked the rise of English couturiers to a democratizing ethos in London, yet it was produced in response to the heightened interest of the world's press caused by the run up to the lavish Coronation of King George VI.

In an article for *The Studio* three years earlier, the influential British dress historian James Laver, in his consideration of the growing influence of the 'English Contribution' to dress design, claimed London dressmakers had become 'conscious of

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<sup>212</sup> Grace Thorncliffe, 'Notes in Diary of a Fashion Model,' *The Moundsville Journal*, Marshall West Virginia, 20 April 1937 (taken from Hardy Amies Press Books, House of Amies, Savile Row, henceforth (HAPB))

their power' not only because of the changes that had taken place in modern British society but also because of the stability of its social traditions:

We who live in England are apt to see nothing but the changes, which have taken place in our social life. To us England is in a state of rapid and alarming flux. To the rest of the world we hardly seem to have moved at all; we are a solid rock in the midst of a torrent, a point of permanence in a changing world. [...] It is inevitable that the foreigner should come to look upon the place where evening dresses are worn as the place where evening dresses can be bought.<sup>213</sup>

In this account Laver posited England's perceived 'stability' and 'conservatism' as a key stimulant behind the London dressmakers' market advantage. This highlights the inherent contradictions evident within the mediation of London dress design in the 1930s. In one way it celebrated both the modern and open attitude of society, whilst also in another it utilised the continuation of the country's traditional class and monarchical structures to authenticate the production of fashionable dress.

To a certain extent both articles can be explained by the instability in continental Europe brought by the rise of totalitarian politics, which meant that in comparison Britain, whilst still an imperial class-based nation, was seen as a democratic ally that was culturally and politically closer to the United States.<sup>214</sup> The way in which London society and its fashions were reported can however be seen as equally indicative of the propaganda that emanated from Britain throughout the 1930s. At its basis, this had a particular agenda to present the country, in line with American social ideals, not as class-riddled and imperialistic but as stable, modern and inclusive. Having shown how the designers move to creative autonomy was supported by the commercial infrastructure of Mayfair and London's specific platforms for display and dissemination, this section of the chapter now turns to the role the economic situation played in the establishment of London's couture industry. It recognises that the city's acknowledgement as a fashion centre came at a time of worldwide economic depression and therefore explores the role political propaganda and protectionism played in supporting the development of London's couture industry.

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<sup>213</sup> James Laver, 'Fashion – The English Contribution', *The Studio*, November 1934 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>214</sup> By 1937 this instability was compounded by Mussolini's Abyssinian War (September 1935 – May 1936), Nazi Germany's Reoccupation of the Rhineland (March 1936), the Spanish Civil War (July 1936) and the Formation of the Axis (November 1936).

Throughout the interwar period, historians acknowledge that propaganda increased in importance as the British government became aware that, for reasons of trade and peaceful relations with other nations, it needed to take positive steps to make its country better understood abroad.<sup>215</sup> An important guide to this process, produced in response to the onset of economic depression and a decrease in British exports, was Sir Stephen Tallents' 1932 pamphlet *The Projection of England*.<sup>216</sup> In his work as Secretary of the Empire Marketing Board, Tallents had noted the growth of anti-British state-subsidized propaganda by foreign governments and was alarmed by its impact on British cultural and commercial relations. He argued that to maintain Britain's prosperity and to promote both trade and diplomacy it was essential to engage in what he called, the 'new art of national projection'. This practice aimed to dispel the myth being constructed by foreign propaganda that the nation was in decline and replace it with a more positive modern image of British society and culture. The government's response to Tallents' call for cultural propaganda was the establishment of the state-sponsored British Council in 1934. The British Council's *Mission Charter* (which remains the same today) aimed at 'promoting abroad a wider appreciation of British culture and civilization [...by] encouraging cultural, educational and other interchanges between the United Kingdom and elsewhere'.<sup>217</sup> The next year Rex Leeper (the British Council's first director), in an article for *Contemporary Review* used Tallent's ideas in his claim that; 'there is a widespread feeling that in an age of instability England alone is stable, [...] It is time that this nation of shopkeepers did a little stocktaking to see how far our contribution to civilization is understood elsewhere and to decide how best we can satisfy this new demand for fuller information about almost every aspect of our national life, character and institutions'.<sup>218</sup> In an increasingly unstable political and economic world, the British Council presented Britain as modern, but also secure, peaceful and civilised. Interestingly, there are striking similarities evident in both Leeper and James Laver's, aforementioned article, which claimed that the 'power' of the English dressmakers was due to the country's recognition as 'a solid rock in the midst of a torrent, a point of permanence in a changing world'. Both articles, released within four months of each other, are examples of the dissemination of a specific discourse of cultural propaganda

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<sup>215</sup> For further detail see Taylor, 1981, p. 132

<sup>216</sup> Stephen Tallents, *The Projection of England* (London: Olen Press, 1932)

<sup>217</sup> The British Council's original Mission Charter is set out on the British Council website at <http://www.britishcouncil.org>. For further details of the utilization of Tallents' ideas see Taylor, 1981, p.123.

<sup>218</sup> Rex Leeper, 'British Culture Abroad,' *Contemporary Review*, February 1935, pp. 200 – 210

that had become increasingly prevalent by 1935. Laver's account is therefore an indication of the role fashion could play within the narratives of national projection.

In his discussion of the development of international fashion cities, David Gilbert asserts that 'every bit as much as imperial monuments or the great exhibitions, fashion was used as a means of expressing the superiority of certain places in the world order'.<sup>219</sup> In this context it is interesting to explore the role London's creative dressmakers played within British propaganda. This is however made difficult by its covert nature, for although magazine articles and newspaper reports were the dominant medium for national projection, in line with government attitudes such reports had to avoid the appearance of blatant political propaganda.<sup>220</sup> Unlike many of its continental counterparts, it was this aspect that gave British propaganda the appearance of being simply positive publicity.

In 1931, the Department of Overseas Trade pointed out that official propaganda was 'to a large extent a matter of creating an appreciative background for the seller of concrete goods [...therefore] sporting records and stories of national prosperity and efficiency, the Boat Race and the Grand National are influential. Almost any topic which magnifies British institutions comes within this sphere'.<sup>221</sup> The type of events that were used within national projection, such as sporting fixtures and presentations at court, were typical platforms for the display of the London couturiers' wares. Internationally mediated images and reports of the latest gowns worn at such 'British institutions' (such as Figure 36, Stiebel's highly-fashionable gown for a palace garden party) were a pertinent yet discrete way to document and magnify the civilised nature of modern Britain. The juxtaposition of traditional events and fashionable dress demonstrated both the country's stability and capacity to adapt to the modern world. Creative fashion and the idea of London as a modern fashion centre was an effective challenge to the assertion of foreign propaganda that England was, as Tallents had put it, 'down and out'.<sup>222</sup> Fashion reports, with their gendered focus and outward superficiality, whilst apparently innocuous were able to project a positive image of England. Within the British interwar policy of concealed propaganda, fashion as a design form and embodied practice was therefore an effective visual and seemingly apolitical form that connoted many of its ideals.

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<sup>219</sup> Gilbert, 2006, p.14

<sup>220</sup> Taylor, 1981, p. 20

<sup>221</sup> *Department of Overseas Trade memorandum on Interdepartmental Publicity Committee*, 28 March 1931 quoted in Taylor, 1981, p.106

<sup>222</sup> Tallents, 1932, p.7

By the middle of the 1930s, the mechanisms of national propaganda were fully operational and undertaken by a range of official and semi-official organisations established to 'project' Britain abroad. This was achieved, not only through the establishment of the British Council and Tallents' employment as the head of the BBC's public relations, but also by the unprecedented growth of a foreign press corps in London. The British Official News Service, which supplied information directly to foreign newspaper offices and news agencies, was at the centre of this network of mediation. One of the main aims of its overseas representatives and press attachés was to secure 'good copy for the British point of view' in the foreign press.<sup>223</sup> In 1936, the government suddenly increased the News Service's funding and in order to remove suspicion about the integrity of the information supplied also instructed the Foreign Office 'to expand the covert supply of British news to private channels of distribution'.<sup>224</sup> This call for positive propaganda, and the sudden increase in the dissemination of favourable news about Britain offers one explanation for why 1936 was the mediated tipping-point in London's recognition as a fashion centre. To a certain extent the effectiveness of fashion reportage within national projection accounts for the incongruity of the acknowledgment of a London couture industry at a time of economic depression.

The 'great slump,' which followed the Wall Street Crash in 1929, paradoxically caused further social, economic and political changes that proved beneficial to London's creative dressmakers. Victor Stiebel, for instance, recalled that setting up his business in the worst year of the depression, was ironically fortuitous. In his unpublished memoirs he pointed out that:

In '32 the economic situation in Great Britain was disastrous. Ever since the Wall Street Crash in '29 money has been scarce and there was a strong disinclination to spend it. All my friends and my solicitor and accountant had tried to dissuade me from opening a luxury business at such an inopportune moment; gloomily they said that it would need a turnover of £20,000 to make the thing pay. That first year we did a turnover of £40,000, what they did not realise (and

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<sup>223</sup> Taylor 1981, p.67

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.





Figure 36: Victor Stiebel, Royal Garden Party Dress,  
*Queen Magazine*,  
May 1933



neither did I) was that the very fact of opening a business during those economic doldrums would be a spark of interest, not only to the National Press ... but also for potential customers who for so long had been preached at about the sinfulness of extravagance. The timing of my first collection was therefore lucky.<sup>225</sup>

By the end of 1933, recovery had begun and between 1934 and 1937 Britain sustained growth that extended through most sectors of the economy, particularly in the South East. Economic and business historians agree that consumption rose steadily throughout this period, particularly for fashion goods.<sup>226</sup> The type of quantitative evidence used to support these assertions may demonstrate the growth and vitality in the consumption of fashion but it does not account for the move of consumer patronage from Paris to London. This can be explained more readily by the qualitative impact of three specific governmental policies instigated in response to the rapid fall in export revenue: the *Buy British* campaign, devaluation and the imposition of protective tariffs. These key developments in economic policy, a depression-induced retreat from the capitalist free-market, were to have a positive impact on the English fashion industry through their appeal to consumers' patriotism and financial prudence.

In February 1932, the month Stiebel and Molyneux launched their London houses, Hartnell flew his mannequins and models to Paris (Figure 37) and informed *Pathé News* that as 'several of the big French dressmakers are coming over here, I go in the spirit of friendly rivalry, though I admit that my main objective is to make people buy British abroad'.<sup>227</sup> In that same month *Vogue* opened with the advert seen in Figure 38, which encouraged its readers to consider their fashion consumption in terms of a patriotic act and ensure that the clothes and accessories they bought were British. Hartnell's comments and this advert were a response to the *Buy British* campaign

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<sup>225</sup> Stiebel, *Unpublished Memoirs* (Property of Adrian Woodhouse)

<sup>226</sup> See for example A. Godley, A. Kershen, & R. Schapiro, 'Fashion and Its Impact on the Economic Development of London's east End Womenswear Industry, 1929 – 62: The Case of Ellis and Goldstein', *Textile History*, 34 (2), 2003, pp. 214 – 228. This research demonstrates that consumption rose steadily and the fashion content of demand across a broad market was higher in the 1930s than in the 1950s. For a consideration of wider areas of growth see, D. H. Aldcroft, *The Interwar Economy: Britain 1919 – 1939*, (London: Batsford, 1970) p. 44, which shows that between 1934 and 1937 real income increased by 19 per cent. Great fortunes were amassed, especially in urban property, finance and consumer goods industries. Consumption rose due to substantial increases in the incomes of wage earners, a shift in the distribution of income, and an overall increase in the average propensity to consume.

<sup>227</sup> 'As Hard as Selling Coals to Newcastle?: Norman Hartnell -famed dress designer - leaves by air with British mannequins to sell British frocks in Paris - the 'home of fashion,' *Pathé film*, 1932 (<http://www.britishpathe.com/video/as-hard-as-selling-coals-to-newcastle>)

initiated by the Empire Marketing Board in November 1931.<sup>228</sup> Whilst the government's adoption of Tallents' theory of national projection may have primarily operated in a covert manner, its forerunner, the *Buy British* campaign, was a highly visible component of trade protectionism. The *Vogue* advert was only one amongst 1,400 items that were disseminated in over 500 newspapers and magazines to ensure that this campaign received extensive national coverage.<sup>229</sup> J. H. Thomas (the Secretary of State for the Dominions) called this drive 'the largest example of government propaganda undertaken in peacetime'.<sup>230</sup> This push for patriotic consumption was to prove beneficial for London's made-to-measure womenswear as the campaign had particular resonance with many couture clients. Firstly, as the Prince of Wales made clear in his public radio address that launched the campaign, this was because women were its main target, as it was an 'opportunity for every woman, in a simple way and in her own way, to help her country in her hour of need'.<sup>231</sup> Secondly, whilst the actual success of the *Buy British* message has proved difficult for historians to accurately measure, Stephen Constantine's research indicates that the more affluent end of the market (particularly those who bought couture) 'appeared to be most susceptible to the propaganda'.<sup>232</sup> In line with the campaign, 1932 also witnessed many newspapers change their attitude towards the London dress designers and the narrative they used in their reviews. For example, at February collection time, the *London Evening News* began to use the language of battle in its fashion coverage, as it purported to have the news from the 'Fashion Front [...in] London's campaign to oust Paris as the world dictator of what women will wear'.<sup>233</sup>

At one level this promotion of nationalistic consumption supported the development of English couture and the viability of the new businesses created in 1932 and 1933 such as those of Victor Stiebel, Digby Morton and Peter Russell. Yet the allure of French clothing was deeply ingrained and difficult to counter by merely a jingoistic call to patriotism. Lady Elizabeth Murray, for example, would later point out in the *Daily Mail*,

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<sup>228</sup> The Empire Marketing Board was set up in 1926. It was established as a substitute for trade tariff reform and protectionist legislation and was abolished in 1933. Its aim was to promote trade throughout the Empire and to promote the consumption of Empire goods.

<sup>229</sup> Stephen Constantine, 'The Buy British Campaign of 1931', *European Journal of Marketing*, Volume 21, (4), 1987 pp.44 -59

<sup>230</sup> J. H. Thomas, *The Times*, 14 November 1931, quoted in Constantine, 1987, pp.44 -59

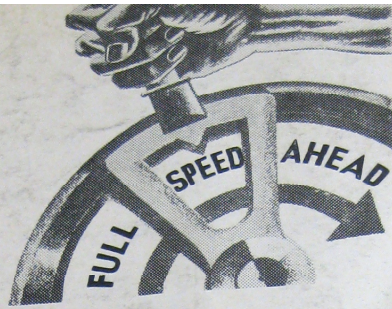
<sup>231</sup> Constantine, 1987, pp.44 -59

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>233</sup> 'Buying an Exclusive Frock From London', *London Evening News*, 6 February 1932 (Alison Settle Archive, Design Archive Brighton GB/NNAF/P44071, henceforth ASA /GB/NNAF/P44071)



Figure 37: 'As Hard as Selling Coals to Newcastle? : Norman Hartnell -famed dress designer - leaves by air with British mannequins to sell British frocks in Paris - the "home of fashion," *Pathé Film*, 1932



# YOUR JOB *for your country*

TO RESTORE the nation's trade balance and to provide work for British men and women  
— this is not just a job for the statesman, the financier, the producer, the industrialist.  
It is everybody's job — *your* job. Whether it is done successfully depends just as much  
on you as on anybody else.

**This is what you are asked to do.**

Find out which products are British and which are not. Study the advertisements,  
examine the shop windows. Ask the retailer. Then, when you are sure that what you  
need has been produced at home, or in the Empire overseas, and produced at least as  
well there as in any foreign land, buy without misgiving. Buy British.

ASK

**'Is it British?'**  
*and uphold your country's credit!*

ISSUED BY THE EMPIRE MARKETING BOARD

Figure 38: *Buy British* Campaign Advert, *Vogue*, February 1932



that the national consumer may well 'wave a flag for England, die for her if necessary' but they would not 'buy dowdy clothes for her'.<sup>234</sup> Alongside the creativity apparent in many London collections it was the implementation of two, politically contentious, government policies that may have helped the acceptance of London as a centre for couture consumption. The first was the devaluation of the pound in 1931, which gave British design houses an advantage by making French products more expensive for British and American consumers.<sup>235</sup> This ensured that when the value of the dollar also fell in 1933, 'the American habit of coming to England for her clothes was already established'.<sup>236</sup> The French franc remained overvalued in terms of the dollar and pound and this continued to curtail its fashion exports until it was finally devalued in October 1936. The English dressmakers, who by this time had been given the opportunity to build up a market position, had also consolidated their position when the economic situation saw the British government reverse its long-established policy of free trade and introduce import tariffs.<sup>237</sup> In 1932, this had enforced a levy of 15 per cent on French couture and textiles, which in conjunction with the weakness of the pound against the franc, particularly in the home market, strengthened the position of London's made-to-measure dressmakers.<sup>238</sup> Despite these developments it took until February 1936, for British *Vogue*, twenty years after its inception, to finally come out in full support of the nation's couture industry, when it changed its editorial policy to promote equally the creative authority of both London and Paris. At this point, it informed its readers that 'since nowadays London itself is so important – even at Paris Collection time! – *Vogue* plans to show, too, pages of fashion from our own famous houses'.<sup>239</sup>

In American *Vogue*, national protectionism and the promotion of home-grown design talent was also made discernible in the launch of its annual 'Americana' issue in 1938. The negative impact this alteration in editorial policy had on French business was demonstrated when, in that year, the French designers in the *Syndicat de Defense de la Grande Couture Francaise*, accused *Vogue* of a conspiracy in its support of non-French

<sup>234</sup> Lady Elizabeth Murray, 'London is the World's Fashion Centre' *Daily Mail*, 17 February 1937 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>235</sup> A.K. Cairncross and B.J. Eichengreen, *Sterling In Decline: The Devaluations of 1931, 1949 and 1967* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983)

<sup>236</sup> Murray, 17 February 1937

<sup>237</sup> Leslie Hannah, Peter Temin and Steve Toms, *Long-term Supply-Side Implications of the Great Depression and 1930s Micro-economic Policies: Anglo-American Reflections*, Conference Paper 'Lessons from the Great Depression for the Making of Economic Policy', British Academy, April 16 – 17 2010. The British tariff thus rapidly led to the Ottawa Agreement of 1932, in which Empire countries agreed to preferential tariffs among themselves and a correspondingly tougher policy toward non-British exporters.

<sup>238</sup> Stewart, 2008, p.84

<sup>239</sup> *Vogue*, 19 February 1936, p28

designers such as Schiaparelli, Mainbocher, Molyneux and Balenciaga. In order to support and defend the rights of native-born designers, the *Syndicat* threatened to stop their adverts and boycott the magazine's viewing privileges at the seasonal shows.<sup>240</sup> The Parisian couturiers' reaction to the editorial decisions of *Vogue*, is indicative of the destabilized relationship between the French producers of luxury goods and the lucrative American market, a process that began with the onset of national trade protectionism brought on by the depression, leading to the imposition of trade tariffs in 1931.<sup>241</sup> In the case of the fashion industry, the most noted reaction to this protectionist stance was the 'American Designer Movement' initiated, the following year, by Dorothy Shaver at the New York department store Lord and Taylor, which was a coordinated promotion of American fashion designers.<sup>242</sup> At the time of the Wall Street Crash, the American fashion industry was heavily reliant on the understanding of Paris as the only source of fashion creation. Historically, to support American-made fashion goods based on French styles, transatlantic retailers, mass-market producers, advertisers, magazines and dressmakers, had worked together to promote and solidify the Parisian hegemony in fashion design. American department stores, in particular, had made an enormous capital investment in the promotion of French couturiers. However, with the onset of the economic depression and the introduction of trade tariffs, the American industry needed to promote its own designers and bring flexibility to the belief in a French style monopoly. The protectionist dismantling of this promotional rhetoric ironically also benefited London couturiers, for as the American fashion industry took steps to undermine French trade and promote both New York and Hollywood as fashion centres, London also became part of this extension of the international fashion system.

Established in 1928, but not fully formalized until 1930, the powerful American Fashion Group was at the centre of this realignment of the fashion trade, setting out to professionalize women's roles in the fashion industry and act as an important source of fashion information for the nation's producers and retailers.<sup>243</sup> One of the Fashion

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<sup>240</sup> Seebohm, 1982, p. 138

<sup>241</sup> This had been initialised in response to the Smoot-Hawley Act, which aimed to protect American producers and discourage the import of foreign luxury goods, and imposed a 90 per cent ad-valorem tax on imported garments 'embellished with embroidery, tulle, spangles (lame) or lace' see Pouillard, 2008, p.72. For example, the business historian Geoffrey Jones has shown that, as these fabrics were key components within French couture, the tariffs led to 'a freeze in the international garment trade', Geoffrey Jones, *The Evolution of Multinational Business: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1996) p. 9 & p. 27

<sup>242</sup> For a detailed analysis of this movement see Arnold, 2009

<sup>243</sup> The American Fashion Group became an organization in 1930. Started by 17 women gathered by Edna Woolman Chase (Editor-in-Chief of American *Vogue*) the original members had four things in common; they were all women; they held jobs of consequence in the fashion business; they held each other in high regard;

Group's fundamental objectives was to encourage an increase in the annual consumption habits of American women and offer the industry a concrete forecast for the future direction of fashion. The latter was demonstrated in 1935 when the Fashion Group organised the first of its influential *Fashion Futures* dress shows which brought together a selection of 'one hundred perfect ensembles [...] representing those fashions most likely to meet the principles of good taste and to accord with the desires of American women'.<sup>244</sup> *The Miami News* declared that this 'exciting style symposium' was, 'a distinct innovation' and 'for the first time gave the women of America and those who cater to their wishes, a composite picture of coming fashions edited by America's foremost authorities from the multitude of early season trends found in the world's fashion centres'.<sup>245</sup> *Fashion Futures* included Parisian couturiers, yet their designs constituted only half of those on display, with equal attention paid to the style forecasts of designers from New York, Hollywood and London.<sup>246</sup> To bring full authority to *Fashion Futures'* predictions the Fashion Group also made sure that the London couturiers received increased recognition within the American market. For example, in 1935, after setting up Stiebel's aforementioned promotional visit the previous year, the Fashion Group also sponsored and coordinated tours for Hartnell, Isobel, and Madame Enos, ensuring the success of the English designers by linking them to prominent journalists and specific retailers.<sup>247</sup> The wider political and industrial implications in the American promotion of English couturiers were made transparent in many of the press reports of

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and held the belief that fashion needed a forum, a stage, or a force to express and enhance a widening awareness of the American fashion business and of women's roles in that business. The Fashion Group was linked to the fashion publishing industry. This can be seen by the first space for the Group, which was donated by Louis Fairchild of Fairchild publications in its *Women's Wear Daily* building. *Harper's Bazaar* donated the second space. Some of the founding members were: Elizabeth Arden (cosmetics manufacturer), Eleanor Roosevelt (Wife of President Franklin Roosevelt), Helena Rubinstein (Cosmetics manufacturer), Lily Dache (Milliner) Jessica Daves (*Vogue*), Nan Duskin (Designer Boutique Owner), Edith Head (Hollywood Costume Designer), Claire McCardell (Fashion Designer) Clare Potter (Fashion Designer) Virginia Pope (Fashion Journalist) Dorothy Shaver (President of Lord and Taylor department store from 1945) Adele Simpson (Couturier), Carmel Snow (Editor of *Harper's Bazaar*) Tobé (Head of Tobé Fashion Research). For further information see The Fashion Group International website <http://www.fgi.org>, or for research into the role of the Fashion Group in the development of the American fashion industry, particularly in New York, see Arnold, 2009, pp.93 -101

<sup>244</sup> Approximately 1,500 industry representatives attended the first *Fashion Futures* (FGIR, Box 73. F.1)

<sup>245</sup> 'New York Models the Perfect Fall-Winter Wardrobe: Fashions Exhibited Represent Exciting Style Symposium,' *The Miami News*, 16 September 1935 (FGIR, Box 144)

<sup>246</sup> The French couturiers represented in *Fashion Futures* for Fall/Winter 1935, which took place at the Astor Hotel in New York, were Alix, Chanel, Creed, Heim, Lanvin, Lelong, Louiseboulanger, Mainbocher, Molyneux, Patou, Piguet, Marcel Rochas, Maggy Rouff, Schiaparelli and Vionnet. The English couturiers were Glen Glenn, Digby Morton, Hartnell, Isobel, Madame Enos, Victor Stiebel and Lanz of Salzburg. The American designers were Louise Barnes, Clare Potter, Helen Cookman, Fiffi, and Muriel King, whilst Adrian, Travis Banton, Howard Greer, Orry Kelly and Bernard Newman represented Hollywood. (FGIR, Box 144)

<sup>247</sup> In Stiebel's case this was B. Altman in New York, Marshall Fields in Chicago and I. Magnin in San Francisco. (VSPA/AAD/1994)

these tours, with the *Chicago Illustrated*, for example, proclaiming that Stiebel was there to 'shatter the myth that only Parisian designers know how to make beautiful clothes'.<sup>248</sup> *Women's Wear Daily* in an article entitled 'Victor Stiebel Hopeful of Establishing London as a Couture Centre for U.S.' also pointed out that London couturiers were 'not restricted to sports types in woollens, as in the past, but are also extending to the formal fashions of afternoon and evening which have been rapidly developed'.<sup>249</sup> In order to protect the American fashion industry and promote American designers, fashion journalists, retailers, and the influential Fashion Group, therefore gave full endorsement to the idea of London as a fashion centre and source of original fashions in order to challenge the popular consumer belief that the creation of new styles was the monopoly of Paris. The role that both this American protectionism and the increase in covert British propaganda played within the evolution of the London couture industry has never before been recognised and yet it was a fundamental element within the city's recognition as a fashion centre during the economic depression of the 1930s.

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You see, what is "hot news" in New York is now hot news in London, and vice versa; whereas it used to be what was news in Paris was news in New York, and the other way round. Also it means that the scene as well as the actors has changed and instead of the setting being Gay Parée – which was the big adventure ten years ago – it is now gay London or gay New York. And these London dress shows – how different they are from those in Paris, where there is an atmosphere of cold hard business, crowded as they are with buyers who, pencil in hand do not let imagination run riot or temptation enter their heads, so cold an eye have they for what are called fashion "fords" (big selling numbers). Only a few of the privileged ladies in French society see new clothes until after they are shown to the 'trade', and their orders are never filled until after the date when the buyers have had theirs dispatched. Here [in London] it is all so different – more like a smart cocktail party, where one is surrounded by all ones friends. You can feel the thrill – not of professional calculation but of a party that is a success, because there are all the ladies who make up the picture of 1936.<sup>250</sup>

In the 1930s, as the case study of Victor Stiebel's business demonstrates, the use of

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<sup>248</sup> 'Society to See Victor Stiebel's English Fashion Creations', *Chicago Illustrated*, 30 November 1934 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>249</sup> 'Victor Stiebel Hopeful of Establishing London as a Couture Centre for the U.S.', *Women's Wear Daily*, New York, 3 January 1935 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>250</sup> 'Our Lives from Day to Day', *Vogue*, 18 March 1936, p.53



London's traditional social scene and its worldview became part of the strategy to secure the recognition of its dressmakers' creative agency. This saw Stiebel and many members of London's 'new school of fashion design' position and promote their fashion statements as expressions of luxury and authority steeped in the cultural politics of London's wealthy elite. These designers were not traditional court dressmakers, despite their appearance of deference and the construction of their professional identity as couturiers was clearly motivated and supported by the social and commercial changes that took place throughout the interwar period. To promote the internationalism of their designs, these creators of original fashions subverted the traditional meaning of court dressmaking to sell new notions of British aristocratic theatricality by carefully aligning these traditions with the international and commercial elements of London. In so doing, they were able to move away from an atmosphere of 'cold hard business' to position their products between culture and commerce, between art and trade and shift their practice from dressmaking to the production of creative couture. These designers therefore capitalized on social change and reacted to the commercial, and cultural shifts of the 1930s in order to give their businesses, and London itself, the requisite cultural capital and cachet of an international fashion centre.

Yet, this chapter has also shown that for London to be cast as a fashion centre, it needed not only creative practitioners who produced original designs at a competitive price and an elite fashion-conscious consumer base that bought and displayed their wares, but also a changed attitude in the international fashion industry. It therefore explored the way a number of interrelated economic and political objectives supported the growth of a defined and visible London-based couture industry. To fully understand this development it recognised the importance of the worldwide economic depression, to show that a number of often hidden, and previously undocumented economic and political factors (such as the mechanisms of British propaganda, American trade protectionism and the business objectives of the fashion press) supported the emergence of the professionalisation of the London couture industry.

This exploration of the evolution of this British design field has also begun to highlight how, in the 1930s, as producers of material and cultural forms sought to construct clear hierarchies within a developing and competitive marketplace, the acknowledgement of the professional identity of a number of London's dressmakers as couturiers became important to the cultural authentication of a network of separate creative industries. Scholars have often described the workings of an interconnected

creative economy as a relatively recent phenomenon, yet the case study of Victor Stiebel's business, which highlights the importance of a creative network in the development of this designer's professional identity as a couturier, suggests that this has historical dimensions.<sup>251</sup> To explore this idea further the following chapter will now consider the role performed by designer-collaboration, a key intellectual concern of this thesis, in the recognition of London as a creative fashion centre. It will therefore consider the creation and operation of the Fashion Group of Great Britain, a specific example of an interconnected network where art and industry met, to shed new light on the mechanisms of British interwar design reform and the mediated national, rather than international, identity of London's couture industry.

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<sup>251</sup> The consideration of the 'creative economy' as a recent occurrence include Richard E. Caves, *Creative Industries: Contracts between Art and Commerce* (Harvard University Press, 2002), David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries* (Sage Publications, 2012) and Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class – Revisited* (New York: Basic Books, 2014)

**Made in England:  
Pre-War Collaboration and the Pursuit of the American Market (1935 – 1939)**



Fashions from England; British fabrics and British fashions; London as a fashion centre. All those are new sounds in our ears, but constantly recurring sounds. Only a few years ago when the cry was raised “why not London as a fashion centre?” the very idea seemed nonsense. There were not the designers in the capital to make of it a fashion centre. But things have greatly changed within the last five years. The eyes of the world have turned to this country [...] and stayed turned. Young men have arisen as dress designers whose names are mentioned with those of the Paris dress creators [...] The Fashion Group of Great Britain. Five years ago that would have meant nothing but blah, would have had no substance<sup>252</sup>

In December 1936, when the fashion advisor and journalist, Alison Settle claimed that London was now a recognised fashion centre she credited this achievement to the Mayfair dressmakers who had cultivated a reputation for the production of original made-to-measure clothing. She also acknowledged the role of the newly created Fashion Group of Great Britain, particularly its recent organisation of the first collaborative collection of original London couture that in May 1936 had been taken to New York on the maiden voyage of the RMS Queen Mary. The ship’s launch had provided the perfect ambassadorial vehicle for the demonstration of London’s claim to fashion authority, whilst the support offered by the creation of a British branch of the influential American Fashion Group ensured that when the onboard showcase reached New York it achieved its full promotional potential. The American Group issued invitations to ‘socialites and the British colony’, key couture clients, to a glamorous onboard supper dance and fashion show.<sup>253</sup> An estimated 10,000 people saw the collection when it was then shown in two separate presentations to the country’s main store buyers and transferred to a number of department stores in New York, Cleveland and Philadelphia.<sup>254</sup> *Draper’s Record* (the British trade journal) claimed the voyage had ‘without doubt, proved the artistry of the English fashion creators’.<sup>255</sup> Yet, if this was so, it was primarily demonstrated not by the work of the individual designers but by a number of competitors being brought together into a collaborative showcase.

<sup>252</sup> Alison Settle, ‘The Story of The British Fashion Group: Women’s Whims Bring Work’, *Tit-Bits*, 12 December 1936 (ASA/GB/NNAF/P44076)

<sup>253</sup> The London dress creators co-operating in the Queen Mary Showcase were: Reville Ltd., Hardy Amies at Lachasse, Digby Morton, Peter Russell, Victor Stiebel, Robert Douglas, Norman Edwards, Charles James, Winifred Mawdsley, and Ronald Morrel. Norman Hartnell was unable to participate due to the pressures of court dress needed after the funeral of King George V.

<sup>254</sup> ‘British – U.S. Interchange of Abilities Urged: Great Possibilities in Relation-ships of American Ready to Wear and British Styles and Fabrics, says E.H. Symonds’, *Women’s Wear Daily*, June 1936 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>255</sup> ‘London Collections Reviewed,’ *Draper’s Record*, October 1936 (HAA)

In the 1930s, there were many made-to-measure fashion producers throughout Europe, however it was unusual for individual cities or their designers to achieve international fashion authority and recognition. This chapter will demonstrate that to present an alternative to Paris, there was a need not only for a substantial number of autonomous design-originators but also for these businesses to be linked into a clearly defined network of fashion production and promotion. The Queen Mary's collective couture showcase is therefore an important indication of the role designer collaboration played in the recognition of London as a fashion centre. It also demonstrates a move towards an effective network of specific London couturiers, which came together to attract the attention of the North American market. The first chapter, which considered the initiation of London's couture industry, pointed to the importance of an interconnected network of creative practitioners and a general move towards the professionalisation of creative design practice. This chapter now extends the analysis beyond the creative autonomy of individual dressmakers to offer a fuller examination of the role collaborative networks played in the development and transatlantic appeal of Britain's couture industry in the 1930s.

As the number of London-based creative dress houses grew, so too did the need to expand demand. Mayfair dressmakers had only a finite consumer market; their clothes were sold in a high price bracket and they needed to preserve the exclusivity of their made-to-measure models so could not risk their sale for adaptation by British wholesalers. In England a social anxiety surrounded exclusivity in dress, an impulse clearly indicated by, Figure 39, taken from the *Daily Mirror* in August 1936, which shows the arrival in Southampton of the American actor Douglas Fairbanks and his wife (formerly Lady Ashley) being met by the English actress Heather Thatcher. Unfortunately, despite purchasing their clothes on different continents, both women had chosen to wear the same Stiebel model. The newspaper article that accompanied this image, under the heading 'Identical Dresses!' took immense pleasure in the social embarrassment of this sartorial *faux pas*. Yet it was in this duplication that Stiebel's move from a court dressmaker to international couturier is made most apparent; a visual indication of the commercial reality of couture production, which Nancy Troy calls 'the logic of fashion', the tension between originality and reproduction that increased in the



Figure 39: 'Identical Dresses!' *The Daily Mirror*, August 1936

early twentieth century in response to developments in the ready-made clothing industry.<sup>256</sup> Whilst the seasonal couture model was never intended to be a one-off original, in England each model's copy was carefully limited or adapted for individual clients. However, when sold to foreign buyers it was destined for serial reproduction either made-to-order or ready-to-wear in department stores and elite dress shops, or for further adaptation by clothing outlets that catered to a broader consumer market. Thus, during the interwar period the couturier's role was to cater to an elite clientele and also to act as a fashion authority to authenticate the serial reproductions of foreign, and most specifically American, producers. This chapter explores this hidden process of validation and acknowledges the key role the growth of a mass market for ready-made clothing played in the development of both London's couture industry and its recognition as a fashion centre.

In America, at the start of the twentieth century, middle class women had been reluctant to wear ready-made clothing due to its perceived lack of quality, individuality and status. Rob Schorman's research shows that, at this point, many women still had items that were readily available pre-made (such as blouses and skirts) made-to-measure by their own dressmakers or professionally at department stores and dress shops.<sup>257</sup> The first quarter of the century was however pivotal for the American clothing industry, when new and efficient production methods led to competitive prices, increased quality and accuracy in fit and sizing. These advances were supported by the expansion and improvement of the country's transport and communication networks and innovations in retail, such as the growth in department stores and mail order, helping to both ensure the acceptance of off-the-peg clothing and to create a market where standardisation in dress gained cultural acceptance.<sup>258</sup>

In America, challenging the boundaries between elite and mass consumption and elite and mass taste the advances made in the production and retail of ready-made clothing led to a different attitude towards exclusivity in dress, where the idea of standardisation, rather than a negative, gained cultural acceptance as an indication of

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<sup>256</sup> Troy, 2003, p.4

<sup>257</sup> Rob Schorman, *Selling Style: Clothing and Social Change at the Turn of the Century* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003) pp. 51 – 57

<sup>258</sup> In Britain gender and class ideologies that emphasized the importance of clothing as an expression of a woman's individuality, acted as a disincentive to the consumption of ready-made clothes. Dressmaking at all market levels remained the norm. See for example Barbara Burman, *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford: Berg, 1999) p.35 & p.49

the American aspiration for democratic universality.<sup>259</sup> For example, as Victor Stiebel publicly stated in 1934, 'the women of New York are the great copyists because they all wear the same clothes at the same time'.<sup>260</sup> In a speech given to the American Fashion Group, he commended the American market for its appreciation of novelty and new ideas in modern dress, but also offered a critique of the lack of individualism caused by a strict adherence to the dictates of fashion:

It makes such a difference to find that one's newest and most exciting ideas are accepted and criticized constructively, instead of just being ignored as is so often the case in England [...] I think the standard of chic in America, or rather in New York, is unbelievably high. [...] However,] American women are much too willing to accept a new idea. They will follow faithfully whatever fashion dictates [...] but there is a complete lack of individuality. Ninety percent of the women look the same and it gets so dull looking at miles of mink and in the evening fields of ermine. It is all too uniform and if only Americans would consider themselves a little and not be such slaves to the latest ideas, then I would have not one word of criticism to offer.<sup>261</sup>

What Stiebel saw as the American attitude to dress was the antithesis of the exclusivity and individuality inherent within European made-to-measure production. However, French couturiers had adapted their practice to take full advantage of the opportunity for serial reproduction that this outlook facilitated. So much so, that by the interwar years, with the decrease in actual couture clients, the sale to American buyers of both original and 'bonded models' (where designers sold toiles, rather than garments, to be made-up abroad and thereby avoid import tariffs), often for large-scale reproduction, was a key component within the economic viability of the Parisian couture industry.<sup>262</sup>

Amidst the copious publicity that accompanied the Queen Mary showcase in May 1936, only *Women's Wear Daily* (the American trade newspaper) made clear the main business objective and stimulus for this collective endeavour, as it claimed the collection had been created to demonstrate the 'originality of design of Britain's leading couturiers [...] and the] great possibilities in the interchange of American ready-to-wear for British styles

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<sup>259</sup> For a consideration of the development of this attitude to standardisation, where industrial 'standards' came to denote efficiency, production control and quality see Blaszczyk, 2012, p.78

<sup>260</sup> 'Review of Mr. Victor Stiebel's lecture at the Women's Service Hall', *Nursery World*, April 1937 (Press cutting held by Adrian Woodhouse)

<sup>261</sup> *Fashion Group Bulletin*, Luncheon at the Ritz Carlton Hotel New York, 20 November 1934. (FGIR, Box 144. F.6)

<sup>262</sup> Stewart, 2008, p. 80



and fabrics'.<sup>263</sup> For London's elite dressmakers the business opportunities presented by the vast American market, with its consumers' seemingly homogeneous attitude to dress and its mass-market producers' need for clear fashion guidance, could not be ignored.<sup>264</sup> The showcase on the Queen Mary was the first example of the English couturiers working together to create a joint collection. This chapter will therefore question to what extent the needs of the American market in the 1930s provided the stimulus not only for designer collaboration but also for the development of a London couture industry.

The Queen Mary collaborative export collection was one of the first activities facilitated by the Fashion Group of Great Britain. This previously little-considered branch of the American Fashion Group was established in 1935 and disbanded in 1940 and contained seventeen of London's creative dressmakers.<sup>265</sup> Most accounts of the formation of the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers see it as an unprecedented instance of collaboration. Taylor and Wilson's work is indicative of this in its contention that 'it took a world war to force British couturiers to work together'.<sup>266</sup> However, as Hardy Amies pointed out in 1954, although the Incorporated Society and 'the whole idea of an established and organised *haute couture* in London is very new [... and the impetus to collaboration was] the encouragement of export during the war [... this had already begun by] the year of the Coronation of George VI in 1937'.<sup>267</sup> In 1942, just after the Incorporated Society was created, the designer Digby Morton also told an interviewer from Mass Observation that it was not a new idea, but a 'continuation' of the collaborative activity of the Fashion Group of Great Britain.<sup>268</sup> This Group has however only received brief mention within fashion history and remained unacknowledged until 1997, whilst the link to the

<sup>263</sup> 'British – U.S. Interchange of Abilities Urged: Great Possibilities in Relation-ships of American Ready to Wear and British Styles and Fabrics, says E. H. Symonds,' *Women's Wear Daily*, June 1936 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>264</sup> By 1920 the United States had a population of 106 million, whereas Britain had a population of approximately 40 million. After the First World War America was the world leader in banking and industry and had the largest consumer market.

<sup>265</sup> The Made-to-Measure Dressmakers involved with the Fashion Group were: Hardy Amies (Lachasse, 9 Farm Street, W1) Norman Hartnell (26 Bruton Street, W1) Mattli (6 Yeoman's Row, SW3) Digby Morton (63 Grosvenor Street, W1) Victor Stiebel (22 Bruton Street, W1) and Madame Alexedis (21 Grosvenor Street, W1) Richard Busvine (Viola Redfern Ltd, 21 Hanover Square, W1) Madame Champcommunal (Worth, 50 Grosvenor Street, W1) The Hon. Mrs. Cripps (Robert Douglas Ltd., 21 New Bond Street, W1) Dennis Glenny (Genne Glenny, 64 Grosvenor Street, W1) Sophia Harris (Motley, Garrick Street, WC1) Alex Lord (Leathercraft Ltd, 42 Berkeley Street, W1) Dora & Raemonde Rahvis (19 upper Grosvenor Street, W1) Schiaparelli (6 Upper Grosvenor Street, W1) Rose Taylor (60 Grosvenor Street, W1) Teddy Tinling (8 Hanover Street, W1.) Mrs. Guy Olliver (73 Grosvenor Street, W1) Information taken from document held in the Hardy Amies Archive, Savile Row

<sup>266</sup> Elizabeth Wilson and Lou Taylor, *Through the Looking Glass: A History of Dress from 1860 to the Present Day* (London: BBC Books, 1989), p. 123

<sup>267</sup> Hardy Amies, *Just So Far* (London: Collins, 1954), p. 9

<sup>268</sup> Digby Morton, *Mass Observation Interview*, 3 March 1942, (Mass Observation Archive, TC 18 – Box 4) (hereafter: MOI)

American Group has never been recognised or explored.<sup>269</sup> The most recent reference is in Robert O'Byrne's consideration of London's construction as a fashion capital, where the British Fashion Group is briefly considered as the foundation for the development of the city's designer fashion. In this account O'Byrne asserts that this example of designer collaboration was 'fatally flawed by a problem that would hamper the development of the high fashion industry in Britain for a long time to come: lack of unity.'<sup>270</sup> The justification for this assertion is however limited.<sup>271</sup> This chapter will therefore focus on the Fashion Group of Great Britain, in order to question this 'lack of unity' and posit an exploration of this embryonic interwar collaboration as the most important foundational point for understanding the development of both London's couture industry and claim to fashion centre status.

### **2:1) The Fashion Group of Great Britain: 'The Most Charming Attempt to Ally Art and Industry'**

You are here [at the Fashion Group of Great Britain's inaugural lunch] a gathering of leaders: practically speaking, a miniature Who's Who. You are a cross section of the taste of Great Britain and you represent between you most of the great industries of the country and the country's prosperity rests to a large extent on your shoulders. Call it if you will a coordinating link between designers, creators, manufacturers, wholesalers, and retailers down to the public. Call it if you will a group that exists to coordinate the brains of fashion. Call it, if you will not only an exchange of ideas, but also an exchange of personalities. Call it a collecting together of the key people in each branch of fashion. In fact, in Mr. H. G. Well's words call it the "shape of things to come".<sup>272</sup>

In November 1934 the American Fashion Group informed its members that, 'under the leadership of Alison Settle who has kindly consented to be our Regional Director,' it now planned to create a British branch.<sup>273</sup> After seven years as Editor and Director of British *Vogue*, Settle was an ideal choice to lead this new organisation, as she had procured and also learnt to manipulate a broad range of contacts across a spectrum of cultural,

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<sup>269</sup> Colin McDowell, *Forties Fashion and the New Look* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997) p.22, p.40 & p.183, Edwina Ehrman, 2004, p.111, Robert O'Byrne, *Style City: How London became a Fashion Capital* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2009), pp. 10 – 11

<sup>270</sup> O'Byrne, 2009, p. 10

<sup>271</sup> O'Byrne draws this conclusion from the fact that Norman Hartnell, the most successful English couturier at that time, did not participate in the joint shows the Group held for American buyers. This summation is based on the brief account of the Group in Colin McDowell's *Forties Fashion and the New Look*, (Bloomsbury, 1997)

<sup>272</sup> Settle, 31 October 1935 (FGIR, Box 125.F.2)

<sup>273</sup> *Fashion Group Bulletin*, 20 November 1934 (FGIR, Box 125.F.2)

industrial and commercial production. This is made obvious by both the calibre and number of people she convinced to join and actively participate within the Fashion Group of Great Britain, with its initial membership of around one hundred creative practitioners who had reached prominent positions in their respective fields. Documentation of those present at the Group's inaugural lunch shows that by October 1935 Settle had brought together an impressive 'Who's Who' of members. For example, the opening speeches, were given by H. G. Wells (England's most famous author of the time) René Clair (the French film director) and Hubert (the Hollywood costume designer), to a room of 140 people that included: Cecil Beaton, Norman Parkinson, Edna Woolman Chase, Sir William Crawford, Ashley Havinden, Edward McKnight Kauffer, Oliver Messel, Sybil Colefax, Elsa Schiaparelli, C.B. Cochran, Edmund Dulac, Constance Spry, James Laver and Elizabeth Arden.<sup>274</sup> The transcript of the speeches given at this event shows that Sir Herbert Morgan, author of many guides on British business efficiency and organisation, proposed the main toast 'to this possibly the most intelligent and certainly the most charming attempt to ally art and industry'.<sup>275</sup>

The Group's first President was Lady Ivy Chamberlain (sister-in-law of the Chancellor of the Exchequer); Norman Hartnell and Alison Settle became Vice Presidents; Victor Stiebel the Chairman alongside Ronald Fleming, the interior decorator, as Vice Chairman and Margaret Havinden of Crawford's Advertising Agency as Secretary. The main committee members were the milliner Aage Thaarup and the

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<sup>274</sup> The inaugural lunch took place on 31 October 1935; there were 60 members and 80 guests present. Alongside the 17 dress designers and those mentioned in the above text the members also included Mrs. Bembaron, Lady Earle, Alistair Morton, Betty Penrose, Derek Patmore, Renee Scudamore, Harry Yoxall, Princess de Rohan Dilkusha, Mrs. A. Vick of Rodier limited, and Mary Joyce of Century Press. Charles Rayne of Rayne Shoes. Telegrams were received from the architect Oliver Hill about the Paris international exhibition of 1937, Sir William Crawford (founder of the Crawford's Advertising Agency), Lady Earle, Schiaparelli, the illustrator Edmund Dulac, Mary Brooks Picken (Chairman of American fashion group) Alice Perkins (Chairman of the Paris Fashion Group) Colonel Styles (Head of Horrocks Fabrics) Elizabeth Arden, James Laver, Lady Lee of Total Broadhurst. Other Non-Fashion Design Members present were from many different fields i.e. Architecture (Ralph Tubbs), Buyers, (Fortnum & Mason – Miss Nina LeClercq. & Harrods (Miss E. Richards) Carpets (Crossley and Sons Ltd., Cosmetics, (Elizabeth Arden, Cyclax) Corsets (Berlei, Warner Bros.) Dress Houses (Jaeger Co. Ltd.) Executives (Lady Chamberlain, Miss Florence Sangster of W.S. Crawford, Mrs. Oliver Strachey of the Women's Employment Federation) Fabrics (Donald Bros., Campbell Fabrics, Arthur Coles, Courtaulds, Warner & Son, Edinburgh Weavers, William Hollins, Ramsden Wood Print Works, Stevenson & Sons Ltd., Morton Sundour Fabrics, Munro & Co, British Celanese Ltd., Kays of Shetland, Cumberland Mills,) Fashion School (Peter Holliss Reville School 15 Hanover Square) Flowers (Constance Spry) Furs (The National Fur Co.), Gloves, Hairdresser (Mr. Raymond) Hats (Scotts, Aage Thaarup) Interior Decoration ( John Fowler, Sibyl Colefax Ltd., Mrs. & Mr. Hayes Marshall of Fortnum and Mason, Mollo and Egan Ltd. ) and Journalists (Alison Settle, Madge Garland). (Information taken from FGIR, Box 125, F.2)

<sup>275</sup> Morgan was the Chairman of Smith's Crisps and a key member of the Travel Association that promoted Britain as a tourist destination. He wrote influential texts on business management and efficiency in both production and retail. See H. E. Morgan, *Business Organisation* (London: Eveleigh Nash Company, 1917) and *Retailers Compendium: A complete and practical guide to successful shopkeeping enterprise* (1923). It was Morgan who in the First World War coined the motto 'business as usual'.

editors of *Harper's Bazaar*, Joyce Reynolds and *The Studio*, Geoffrey Holme. Thus the Group's main board was headed by a president with political influence and brought together key players from the fields of creative dress and textiles with representatives from what Frank Mort describes as 'the twin engines of modern consumerism': advertising and marketing.<sup>276</sup> Key members such as Settle, Havinden and Reynolds were intermediaries whose careers were based on the creation of 'extraneous interventions into the market in order to stimulate demand for consumer goods, regularise output, and flatten the booms and slumps of the trade cycle'.<sup>277</sup> This ensured that the aspirations underpinning the Fashion Group of Great Britain were fully informed by the new promotional culture under expansion in the 1930s.

Settle's speech at the inaugural lunch set out the Group's strategy: to build 'friendly contact,' to break down 'barriers of reserve and custom [...] to hold meetings, small meetings between this person and that; between designers and manufacturers; between people who have something in common, in order that they may pool their difficulties and their interests.'<sup>278</sup> The Group was therefore presented to its new members as an informal forum where aesthetic leaders could communicate with one another. There was, however, an altruistic agenda behind the Group's formation that went beyond the establishment of individual business contacts: it was hoped that the shared knowledge of a cooperative network of fashion leaders and tastemakers could be harnessed to increase the stylistic appeal and commercial viability of a range of British products that had been traditionally sold by their quality and price and supported by the Empire's favourable trading system. However, in a period of economic depression, their market, both at home and abroad, had been reduced not only by trade tariffs but also by an increase in foreign competition. One area where the latter was particularly noticeable was in the sale of imported cotton dresses in the home market, where American models vastly out-performed their British equivalents. So much so, that by 1939 a Board of Trade survey demonstrated that these American products, despite 20 percent trade tariffs represented 47 percent of total UK imports.<sup>279</sup> In the 1930s US government backed initiatives in the American apparel industry into standardisation of dress sizes,

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<sup>276</sup> Frank Mort, 'The Commercial Domain: Advertising and the Cultural Management of Demand', in *Commercial Cultures: Economies, Practices, Spaces*, edited by P. Jackson, M. Lowe, D. Miller and F. Mort (Oxford/ New York: Berg, 2000) pp. 35 – 53 (36)

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Settle, 31 October 1935

<sup>279</sup> The import figure for American dresses is taken from data from 1939 included in J.M Brewster 'Imports from USA of Made Up Garments General Correspondence: Summary of the export industry' *Board of Trade Memo*, 15 July 1954 (BT64/4275)

engineering developments that helped the section method of construction (where garments were constructed by makers that worked on individual sections rather than the whole) and developments in spun rayon that could be used on machines set up for cotton. Such innovations increased production by 25 per cent and gave American manufacturers a competitive product that increased its market share of both French and English markets.<sup>280</sup> Cotton was the British industry that had registered the most dramatic collapse in the interwar period and the sale of imported dresses was a particular source of anxiety for both the British fashion and textile industry and the British government.<sup>281</sup> Reports produced to address this market weakness by both the Man-Made Fibres Federation and the Board of Trade, concluded that the American products maintained their position not only because of their accurate sizing and fit but also, and most importantly, because of the appeal of their fashion-conscious designs.<sup>282</sup>

The concept of fashionable styling in order to raise the 'eye appeal' of industrial products was a fundamental component within the American approach to design. Since the late 1920s, American manufacturers had fine-tuned strategies that used product styling in order to stimulate sales and counteract the problem of under-consumption that afflicted mass production. Through the process of 'built-in obsolescence', design was used to both anticipate and encourage changes in consumer taste in order to limit mass-market saturation. This can be seen most clearly in the American profession of design consultancy, which emerged during the depression when industrial design entrepreneurs such as Raymond Loewy and Henry Dreyfuss with backgrounds in advertising, were employed by many companies as styling experts in order to increase profits.<sup>283</sup> At the British Fashion Group's inaugural lunch Settle pointed out that in comparison to American production, what she referred to as this 'element of fashion, the greatest trading influence in the world [...] on which more money is spent than on anything else, is unsupported in Britain because producers with common causes do not communicate

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<sup>280</sup> For further details see M.D.C. Crawford, *The Ways of Fashion* (New York: Fairchild Publishing Co., 1948) p.220

<sup>281</sup> Before the First World War 80 per cent of the Cotton industry's output was exported and made up 25 per cent of British exports and held 65 per cent of world trade in cotton textiles. By 1938 this was more than halved due to the development of industries in former markets and competition in third markets such as Japan. For further details see D. H. Aldcroft, *The Inter-war economy: Britain 1919 – 1939* (London: Batsford, 1970) p. 156, also see, Dorothy Fox, 'Fashion is not all Spinach: Research Findings of the Man-Made Fibres Federation', *Fashion Group Quarterly*, Autumn 1939, p. 5-6

<sup>282</sup> Fox, 1939, p.6 & Aldcroft, 1970, p. 156

<sup>283</sup> British histories of design recognise the influence of the American consultant designer on British design practice in the 1930s. See for example Penny Sparke, *Consultant Design: the history and practice of the designer in industry* (London: Pembrige Press, 1983) and Sparke, *Introduction to Design and Culture 1900 to the Present* (London: Routledge, 2004) This contains a comparative discussion of the designer for industry in Europe and the USA.

with each other.<sup>284</sup> She therefore presented the Fashion Group as a meeting point for creative practitioners that would correct this problem. Although it was not made explicit to its members, the Fashion Group of Great Britain was therefore underpinned by the belief that the adoption of American commercial strategies was imperative for Britain's future economic vitality.

The appeal for creative practitioners to share their knowledge also drew on another concept developed within American interwar political and commercial culture: cooperative associationism. This brought to Britain a business model that promoted the dissemination of ideas for the benefit not only of commerce but also the country as a whole: a key component within the system of progressive reform implemented throughout the 1920s by America's Department of Commerce. Under the leadership of Henry Hoover, this system drew on the ideas of 'scientific management' and brought together many different interest groups in order to increase industrial efficiency and productivity and thereby improve the standard of living for all American citizens.<sup>285</sup> This created business cultures that valued and promoted networks of cooperation and 'the progressive idea that businesses could set aside their differences and use trade associations to advance the common good'.<sup>286</sup>

Cooperation in order to improve industrial efficiency was a founding ideology behind the American Fashion Group. Alongside its initial aim to professionalise the role of women within the industry, its main rationale was to analyse new styles and consumer preference in order to forecast the direction of consumption, then to share this knowledge throughout the industry to direct and coordinate supply and to ensure demand. Regina Blaszczyk, in her work on colour forecasting, claims that this form of business interaction was a thoroughly North American phenomenon whereby only there 'did collaboration among experts generate fashion forecasts that could be applied across a broad range of style industries'.<sup>287</sup> In Britain the idea of businesses working in cooperation for the trade benefit of others was new and needed acclimatisation.

Articles contained in the Fashion Group of Great Britain's first quarterly magazine show that in 1935 its definition of both fashion and its main objective to disseminate

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<sup>284</sup> Settle, 12 December 1936 (ASA/GB/NNAF/P44076)

<sup>285</sup> For an exploration of scientific management also called 'Taylorism' see Gregory Votolato, *American Design in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1998) p.78 & p.143 & 166. For Hoover's role in the implementation of the American System of Progressive Democracy, see Blaszczyk, 2012, p.167

<sup>286</sup> Blaszczyk, 2012, p.86

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

trend forecasts were foreign concepts to many of its members. So much so, for example, that Settle's first editorial had to take time to define and explain both the meaning of 'fashion' and the concept of a 'trend'. The term fashion, she claimed, was used 'in its entire sense and not the word "fashions" as not all fashions become fashion'.<sup>288</sup> In this definition fashion depended on the creation of and adherence to definable trends. Settle explained this process to the Group's members in the following manner: 'the grand idea you have inside your own head, that is an inspiration: then when you carry it out and materialise it, that is the expression of your idea; but it doesn't become a trend until it influences other people and moves in a general direction'.<sup>289</sup>

From December 1935 onwards, to ensure that the members' ideas could be immediately translated into definable fashion forecasts, the Group began to hold regular meetings where ideas were converted into clear trend predictions. At these trend luncheons members were encouraged to write down their style forecasts and give either short talks or produce 'trend boards' that were pinned around the walls for discussion. The findings of these events were then published in the Group's *Bulletin* for dissemination to members in both Britain and America.<sup>290</sup> Although many of the Group's dressmakers initially participated in these meetings, they were particularly guarded in the discussion of their latest ideas. For example, Norman Hartnell's address at the first trend luncheon (which he claimed was the first public speech he had ever given to an audience) was particularly opaque. This meeting may have taken place at a time when his new collection was almost ready for presentation, yet he claimed 'I cannot tell you much about my own trends in the fashions that I am making at the moment because I am busily engaged on them and it depends how the pencil moves on the paper as to what the silhouette for my next collection will be'. He did however give a vague indication that 'lines ought to be completely concurrent with the times in which they live, and with that in view I am designing along a pencil silhouette'.<sup>291</sup> The caution apparent in this speech is an indication of the problematic nature, for creative practitioners, of the Fashion Group's idealism of 'breaking down barriers' and the 'exchange of ideas'. Dressmakers, such as Hartnell, needed to safeguard the originality of their new designs, so the spirit of cooperation that could be found in American commercial culture, with its

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<sup>288</sup> Transcript of Settle's article for the Fashion Group's quarterly magazine, January 1936 (ASA/GB/NNAF/P44076)

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> For example, by March 1936 the American Fashion Group *Bulletin* started its regular 'News from England' section. (FGIR, Box 125F.2)

<sup>291</sup> Fashion Group *Bulletin*, January 1936 (FGIR, Box 125F.2)

vast market and economies of scale, was difficult to transpose to Britain. Despite the trade structures of its empire, Britain's limited geography and home market had created clandestine business cultures that curtailed this cooperative idealism. It should also be noted, that whilst many of the 'trends' disseminated throughout the American Fashion Group were taken from Paris, alleviating the commercial antagonism of American producers, by comparison London's creative dressmakers were expected to share their ideas with their immediate competitors.

The British branch of the Fashion Group had to therefore negotiate a number of cultural and commercial differences. It may have operated under the aegis of an American organisation, however, analysis of communication with both its members and the British public demonstrates that it was carefully presented as an inherently national body, independent of American control and commercial standardisation. To a certain extent, at a time of increased national protectionism, this could well have been an attempt to alleviate the anxiety that surrounded the American influence on British culture and commerce in the interwar period.<sup>292</sup> One of the only public documentations of the aims of the British Group was written by Settle, in December 1936, for *Tit-Bits* (a weekly mass-circulation magazine) under the heading, 'The Story of The British Fashion Group: Women's Whims Bring Work'.<sup>293</sup> In this account of the Group's first year of operation, Settle, whose title was subtly changed from 'Regional Director' to 'Vice President', denied the fact that it was a branch of a New York organisation and promoted the idea that it should be seen as 'a national body that operates in the friendliest affiliation with the New York and Paris groups'. The need for the British branch to demonstrate a sense of national sovereignty was also made apparent in her discussion of two specific modifications that separated it from its American counterpart. She pointed out that the British Group had vetoed the American idea of 'a women-only organisation, as not to include men as leaders equally with women in this country, as in Paris, was seen as unthinkable'.<sup>294</sup> It also changed the stipulation that the membership be limited to those involved in the design, manufacture and merchandising of dress and fabric. Unlike its American prototype the British Group's definition of the 'branches of fashion' was

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<sup>292</sup> For an exploration of the concept of Americanisation which underpinned these anxieties see for example Jude Davis and George McKay (eds.) *Issues in Americanisation and Culture* (Edinburgh University Press, 2004), also in terms of worries about the destruction of civilisation see Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age* (Allen Lane, 2009)

<sup>293</sup> Settle, 12 December 1936. *Tit-Bits* magazine focused on human-interest stories and had sales of around 500,000. For more information see Martin Conboy, *Journalism: A Critical History* (Sage Publications, 2004)

<sup>294</sup> Settle, 12 December 1936



extended to 'any informed design activity that responded to or forecast changes in public taste'.<sup>295</sup> This included practices such as interior decoration, design for the stage and cinema, elements of the beauty industry such as hairdressing and cosmetics and restaurant food and décor. Settle could therefore draw the patriotic conclusion that the British Group was more inclusive, far reaching and defined by a belief 'that the country's future economic health lies in it becoming a leader of the "world of fashion" not just clothing related – but in dictating fashionable tastes in many fields'.<sup>296</sup>

For its members, the British Group's quarterly magazine also avoided overt references to American business strategies and commercial objectives. Instead it promoted both the personal and altruistic benefits received from the annual membership fee, which, as Margaret Havinden pointed out, could not 'be reckoned in money - it is what you as an individual put into the Group that makes everybody's five guineas worth more valuable'.<sup>297</sup> For the individual, she claimed, membership offered the opportunity to make 'valuable, personal contacts with key people in your own and allied businesses, [...] the backing, if you use it, of a whole organisation of experts in furthering your own particular interest [...] and] the fun of knowing famous people personally and not just by repute'.<sup>298</sup> On a more philanthropic level, the transcript of the inaugural lunch shows that Settle asked the members to put their influence into the Group not only for personal gain, but also as an 'opportunity to take part in a movement to improve public taste [...] to further the cause of good design and offer a representative voice for the creator and the designer. [...] To thereby] challenge unimaginative British manufacturers and retailers whose business approach is to give the public what it wants! Well, the public wants what obviously it can get. Therefore give it the best that there is and it will want it!'<sup>299</sup> In this light, the British Fashion Group was cast as a form of design consultancy that could act as a mouthpiece for the transmission of good aesthetic practice amongst 'the country's best creative practitioners'. In turn, it was hoped that this would encourage design reform as these ideas were filtered to British manufacturers, who would then educate mass consumer taste rather than merely respond to it, increase aesthetic discernment and modify demand towards products that could compete in the international marketplace. The 1930s were formative within the development of mass-market provision, when rapid change stimulated cultural and political anxiety around the consumption habits of the

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> Margaret Havinden, 'Greetings to our Associate Members,' *Fashion Group Circular*, May 1939. (HAA)

<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

<sup>299</sup> Settle, 31 October 1935

masses and the Fashion Group of Great Britain was clearly motivated by a desire to drive and transform this demand cycle towards changes in elite taste.<sup>300</sup> Its philosophy was therefore underpinned by the idea of the passive consumer and a paternal top-down manipulation of the market.

The suggestion that creative dressmakers held the key to design reform for all sectors of British industrial design saw the Fashion Group position London couturiers as the most important conduits of informed design activity. Business success for these practitioners was not only based on originality but also on a thorough knowledge of the fluctuations in their clients' tastes and preferences. For example, the couture saleswoman performed a crucial role in the design process. At dress fittings she interacted with and observed the clients and then informed the design studio of changes in their taste. Thus, made-to-measure dress was produced through a symbiotic design process because the original model was often adapted to the clients' favourite colours, shapes, forms and decorations. Consequently, for the British Fashion Group's design reform agenda the foresight gained in the intimacy of the dressmakers' fitting rooms, a unique space in which to gather information on the fashionable whims of elite society, gave the London couturiers' design knowledge a particular agency.

The preoccupation with the role creative practitioners could play in elevating the standards of public taste gave the British branch of the Fashion Group a specific national inflection, as it aligned its aims with the design reform aspirations of many other groups, organisations and societies that rose to prominence in Britain in the 1930s, in particular, the Council for Art and Industry (CAI), which was set up by the Board of Trade in 1933.<sup>301</sup> This organisation had a brief to educate consumer taste, improve creative training and encourage good design within British manufacture.<sup>302</sup> The link between the

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<sup>300</sup> See for example, Winship, 2000, pp. 15 – 34, Sally Alexander, *Becoming a Woman, and other Essays on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Feminist History* (London: Virago, 1994) and Mica Nava, 'Modernity Tamed? Women Shoppers and the Rationalisation of Consumption in the Interwar Period', *Australian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 1 – 19

<sup>301</sup> There was a considerable flourishing of interest in design for industry. The Design and Industries Association (DIA) was founded in 1915, inspired by the German Deutscher Werkbund, it promoted design understanding between designers, manufacturers, retailers and the general public. The British Institute of Industrial Art (BIIA) set up in 1920 by the Board of Trade was conceived to raise standards of industrial design and public taste in design. The Society of Industrial Artists created in 1930 was also concerned with the professionalisation of design. In 1936 a National Register of Industrial Art Designers was established and the Royal Society of Arts established its Royal Designers for Industry in 1937. For further details see Michael Farr, *Design in British Industry a Mid Century Survey* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1952) pp. 139 - 281

<sup>302</sup> The Council of Art and Industry, was established in response to the Gorell Report of 1932, which examined how to raise the level of Britain's Industrial Art. The Council was the coordinating body set up to stimulate the development of good design. It produced many reports, which included *Designer in Industry* (1937), *The Working Class Home: Its Furnishings and Equipment* (1937), *Design and the Designer in the*

aims of this government-sponsored body and the Fashion Group was not accidental. For example, in 1936, in response to 'the large and increased importation of factory-made-women's dresses from the Continent and America, largely on the score of design' the CAI established a Dress Committee to consider how to improve the standard of design in the women's clothing industry and make Britain 'of more consequence as a creator of original design and less dependent in that respect upon Paris and other foreign sources'.<sup>303</sup> The spur behind this research, as with most government-backed movements towards design reform, was clearly the growth in mass-market consumption and the increase in imports. Under the chairmanship of Sir Frederick Marquis (the future Lord Woolton), the Dress Committee included ten members, four of whom (Alison Settle, James Laver, Joyce Reynolds and Lady Chamberlain) were taken from the Fashion Group, the remainder were employees from the Board of Trade or those involved in education.<sup>304</sup> The evidence that remains of the Dress Committee's research and the Fashion Group's activities demonstrates that the findings of the former informed many of the latter's meetings and communications.<sup>305</sup> The influence of the Fashion Group on the CAI's resultant report, *Design and the Designer in the Dress Trade*, can be seen in the references it makes to the creative autonomy recently achieved by a number of Mayfair dressmakers and its recognition of their practice as a paradigm for design reform throughout the British clothing industry.

The Fashion Group's promotion of the role elite dressmakers could play in the improvement of the products of mass production both mirrored and challenged the discourse of interwar design reform. The utilisation of the couturiers' practice in order to

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*Dress Trade* (1939), although the publication of this was postponed by the start of war. It organised the exhibitions *British Industrial Art in Relation to the Home* (1933), *British Art in Industry* (1935).

<sup>303</sup> Frank Pick, *Report of the Dress Committee of the Council for Art and Industry: Design and the Designer in the Dress Trade* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1939) p.3

<sup>304</sup> Members of the Dress Committee were Sir Frederick Marquis (Chairman) (He was a businessman, politician and statesman, in 1936 he was the Chairman of Lewis's Ltd. Liverpool), Lady Ivy Chamberlain (Vice-Chairman she is also President of the Fashion Group), A. Baylis Allen (Principle of the Bromley School of Art), Rebecca Compton (Occasional Inspector and Examiner to Board of Education), A. S. Hopkins (Assistant Secretary Board of Trade), James Laver (Keeper, Victoria and Albert Museum) Joyce Reynolds (Editor of *Harper's Bazaar*) Alison Settle (Fashion Advisor) Dr. May Smith (Investigator, Industrial Health Research) Mr. R. Tomlinson (Senior Inspector of Art London County Council)

<sup>305</sup> See for example, Ronald Fleming's article for the British Fashion Group's *Quarterly* in 1937, which discusses the problems between art school graduates and industry. This article was produced prior to the release of the Dress Committee's findings, yet it mirrored much of its research and conclusions. The Committee's key finding was that creative education was critical for the development of design standards in British factory-produced dress. Yet, it found that manufacturers were sceptical of art school training and that, in the majority of cases; their 'designers' were recruited from the workroom and therefore 'lacked creativity and merely adapted foreign designs.' Their resultant report concluded that in order to make Britain 'more important as a centre of original design', it needed dress designers with creative ability to find a 'place in industry as a profession'. Pick, 1939

solve industrial problems, aligned with the taste-elevating aspirations of many such proselytisers, who looked towards the aesthetic choices of the more elite and affluent sectors of the market. Where it differed however was fundamental, as it positioned fashion, rather than the functionalist philosophy of the Modern Movement, as the key agent of improvement for the industrial marketplace. At its source, the British modernist polemic, clearly demonstrated in Noel Carrington's influential *Design in Civilisation* of 1935, had a concern with notions of decay within civilisation and culture due to the rise of unrestrained mass consumption. The concept of fashion, which led to the prevalence of change and revivalist styles within the products of mass production, was often used as a clear indication of this decay. Julian Holder has pointed out that the concept of designers, and in particular of architects, 'as guardians of civilisation, engendered a cultural superiority not only towards the construction and aesthetic of design but also to its separate forms'.<sup>306</sup> Within this structured hierarchy the transitory nature of fashion, which did not adhere to a functionalist philosophy, was often situated as the antithesis of the ideals of modern design. By the 1930s the critical discourse that surrounded ideas of reform, evidenced for instance in periodicals such as *The Studio* and *Architectural Review*, demonstrated an increase in the 'preoccupations, priorities and prejudices of an increasingly prescriptive and hegemonic Continental modernism'.<sup>307</sup> The design historian Cheryl Buckley asserts that from the 1930s onwards:

There was a strong emphasis on utility, fitness for purpose and "form follows function". Decoration and historical styles became anathema, along with fashion and the transient, which were rejected in favour of the universal and the timeless. As a consequence, at the very moment that modernist ideas from the Continent were gaining ground, alternative modernisms already evident in British design began to be attacked or effaced from critical discourse. Thus craft, decoration and eclecticism, integral to modernist practices in Britain before 1930, were estranged after it.<sup>308</sup>

The ambitions of the Fashion Group therefore provide evidence of not only a continuation of pluralism but also hybridity within British interwar design reform. The Group merged British design discourse with the modernity of American commercial capitalism; however, in its aspiration to harness and disseminate elite taste to the

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<sup>306</sup> Julian Holder, 'Design in Everyday Things: Promoting Modernism in Britain, 1912 – 1944' in *Modernism in Design* edited by Paul Greenhalgh (London: Reaktion Books, 1990) pp. 123 – 145

<sup>307</sup> Cheryl Buckley, *Designing Modern Britain* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2007) p.81

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

masses rather than simply adhere to the dictates of the market, it fused together both elements of American industrial design with European social idealism. To a certain extent this was a counteraction to the unrestrained commercialism of American design practice where, under the slogan of 'styling follows sales', it operated as a marketing device in which aesthetic judgment was based on mass rather than elite taste.<sup>309</sup>

Unlike other groups established in the interwar period to bring together elite design with mass manufacture, the Fashion Group of Great Britain has not left a legacy of exhibitions, catalogues and publications. Its operation as a meeting point for creative practitioners meant that the majority of the Group's activity was business-to-business. It therefore worked primarily through connections with a cross section of the creative establishment rather than through engagement with the general public. For the historian, the outcomes of this collaborative network are therefore often hidden and the research into this Group has had to be pieced together from a range of fragmentary sources in a number of separate archives.<sup>310</sup> One pertinent example of its activity can be seen in Alison Settle's Advisory and Efficiency Service, which she set up in 1936, after she left the editorship of *Vogue* and became regional director of the British Fashion Group.<sup>311</sup> The business model of this Service was based on the American practice of fashion consultancy and demonstrates that Settle's time at *Vogue* (a magazine that both documented and guided developments in the international fashion industry) had ensured that she was fully versed in American salesmanship and marketing strategies.<sup>312</sup> Within the limited documentation that remains of Settle's Service, her work with the Wedgwood ceramic company, which employed her as a consultant to increase sales between 1936 and the Second World War, is one example of how the Fashion Group's theoretical intentions were put into practice. At a key meeting with Wedgwood in 1937 Settle

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<sup>309</sup> Penny Sparke, *An Introduction to Design & Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Routledge, 1986) p.49. This teaming of commerciality with refined taste is particularly noticeable in the work of Crawford's Advertising Agency, which under the guidance of Havinden and her husband Ashley developed a reputation for a tasteful stylish art-directed approach to advertising. For further detail on Crawford's see Frank Mort, 2000, pp. 35 – 53 (44)

<sup>310</sup> The research on the Fashion Group of Great Britain has been pieced together from fragmentary sources found in newspaper and magazine articles, the Alison Settle Archive in Brighton, the Fashion Group Archive in New York and programmes and assorted ephemera contained in Adrian Woodhouse's Stiebel archive and the Amies archive in Savile Row.

<sup>311</sup> Alison Settle set up her 'Advisory and Efficiency Service' in 1936. This work took many forms: some organisations had a contract, paying a retaining fee so as to be able to command expert advice throughout the year. Others paid a preliminary consultation fee and obtained a written report on the present state of the fashion market. Others had a short consultancy, extending over one or two months of the designing season.

<sup>312</sup> The most famous example of an American fashion consultancy is Tobé Associates (established in New York in 1928 at the same time as the American Fashion Group), which tracked fashion trends, particularly from Paris, and through its regular '*Reports*' disseminated these as clearly defined guidelines for manufacturers and retailers across the country.

informed the company that if it wanted to become a market leader its products had to change consumer taste. To do this they had to 'get by the [retail] buyer, whose taste and partiality decides what stores sell and how it is displayed'.<sup>313</sup> She therefore suggested that the ceramic company operated 'along similar lines' to the London couture houses; 'because the public does not know their own taste until it is visualised for them [... she recommended that they] hold a press show each season in order to dictate the season's new colours, designs, and high fashion models'.<sup>314</sup> To facilitate this process her consultancy sent regular trend forecasts to help guide the company's designers. In April 1938, for instance, Wedgwood was informed that 'the change in dress taste' had influenced all the major interior decoration firms towards an 'Edwardian' aesthetic and that:

This dress tendency is to put to their side the clean and simple lines of the past decade, above all to reject every form of angularity [...] what is most significant is richness. This richness applies not only to trimmings but to colour. [...] West-end decorators regard this as an extremely good sign that fashion is doing all that it can to counteract feelings of economy and of desire for what is inexpensive. They have no doubt in their mind that the dress fashions are prophetic and that the rich gold embroidery used upon pockets, collars, the fronts of jackets and round the necks of dresses, determine the use of gold and other embroideries on cushions, curtains and coverings.<sup>315</sup>

It is interesting that in the reports of the preceding London dress collections, Teddy Tinling was the only designer particularly noted for a major use of gold embroidery.<sup>316</sup> Yet, this incongruity allows Settle's advice to Wedgwood to be viewed as a clear attempt to use the Fashion Group's activity to coordinate and manipulate the market. Tinling's collection was atypical as it used only British fabrics due to the fact that his collection was produced in collaboration with the Fashion Group's Dress Fabric Subcommittee, which in December 1937 had Tinling organise a display of creative British Fabric to encourage its use by his fellow dressmakers.<sup>317</sup> These fabrics were produced in direct response to the findings of the Fashion Group's trend luncheons, which had specified the use of gold embroidery. Tinling, however, was the only dress

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<sup>313</sup> Letter sent from Josiah Wedgwood, Director of Josiah Wedgwood & Sons. Ltd. Etruria, Stoke-on-Trent, to Mrs Alison Settle, 13 November 1936. Settle became their Fashion Advisor, from 1936 until the outbreak of War, for '£50 per year plus expenses'. (ASA/GB/NNAF/P44076)

<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

<sup>315</sup> 'Colour Report' sent to Mr Josiah Wedgwood from Alison Settle, 22 April 1938 (ASA/GB/NNAF/P44076)

<sup>316</sup> See for example, Victoria Chappelle, 'The Group Presents Fashion Notes on the January Dress Show,' *Fashion Group Bulletin*, January 1938 (FGIR, Box 125.F.2)

<sup>317</sup> Ibid.

member to use these fabrics, as the timing of this particular textile showcase was too close to the January collections to ensure the ‘cooperation of the [other] designers’.<sup>318</sup> The trend forecast that Settle sent to Wedgwood should therefore be seen not as an unbiased reflection on the aesthetic dictates of the London dressmakers but as a strategic commercial manoeuvre to control the market. This example of the use of the creative dressmakers’ supposed choice of form, fabric and decoration as a template for the styling of contemporary ceramic tableware also challenges the typical discourse of interwar design reform, as it rejected ‘form follows function’ in order to promote the idea that form should follow fashion and fluctuations in elite dress.

This section of the chapter has demonstrated that the Fashion Group of Great Britain brought together many of the country’s most important creative practitioners in order to construct a network of official tastemakers. This previously unrecognised example of collaborative activity both extends and challenges the understanding of British interwar design reform and also demonstrates a larger formalisation of the private networks of creative production that, as Chapter 1 illustrated, supported the business viability of London’s couture houses. Within the creative network constructed by the Fashion Group a recognisable body of London couturiers was a key determinant in the validation of Britain’s ability to create competitive products at the forefront of fashion.

## **2:2) ‘The Pooling of Pride’: The Fashion Group of Great Britain’s showcase and the influence of the British Colour Council**

I cannot too strongly emphasis that the question of the American market is one of paramount importance. America is not only willing but also eager to buy from us, but they must be humoured and their whims must be indulged. [...] The woman of the U.S.A. with her open-air tastes, her devotion to “the country life” and her ample facilities for indulging it is an obvious subject for the British worker’s skill. The American woman knows what she wants and she can afford to buy it. Let us banish the stupid idea that she is capricious or “difficult” in any way. She has money to spend and if we can supply her with what she wants she will spend that money in this country to the great advantage of our workers. Let us lay ourselves out to capture the transatlantic customer and keep her. Practically the whole of the model houses could be kept by American trade. How much I would like to abolish some of the societies for abolishing things and substitute them with societies for encouraging things. A society for

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<sup>318</sup> In December 1937 the Fashion Group created a Dress Fabric Sub-Committee as an honorary panel of advisers for the textile trade, this included members from the Textiles Subcommittee: E.W. Goodale, Anthony Hunt, Holbrook Jackson, Hayes Marshall and Alistair Morton and 4 members from the Dress Subcommittee: Madge Garland, Norman Hartnell, Victor Stiebel and Teddy Tinling. *Fashion Group Bulletin*, January 1938 (FGIR, Box 125.F.2)

promoting the interests of British dress designers would be a splendid start.<sup>319</sup>

In 1928, Madame Isobel wrote a radio script for the BBC that considered how London could support both its creative model houses and those who aspired to a career in dress design. She concluded that any future development or success needed coordination and depended entirely on an ability to appeal to the American market. However, it was not until the middle of the next decade that the Fashion Group of Great Britain was to answer her call for a Society that would both support and give transatlantic endorsement to London's dressmakers.<sup>320</sup> Whilst the majority of this Group's activity was obscured from public view, the most evident was its coordination (between January 1937 and the outbreak of WWII) of a twice-yearly showcase of London couture for foreign buyers. These exhibitions were effectively trade shows that required the creative made-to-measure dressmakers to present together and edit their collections to appeal primarily to the expectations of the American market. The fact that these were highly-visible and well-documented publicity events explains why, within the historiography of British design, the Fashion Group of Great Britain has only been acknowledged as 'a promotional body for British fashion' whose primary aim 'was to develop sales in the United States'.<sup>321</sup>

Evidence held in the Fashion Group Archive in New York shows that the first action taken by the British Fashion Group to promote the interests of the Mayfair dress houses, took the form of a cocktail party given just before the presentation of the January collections in 1936. This event, brought together the Fashion Group members 'concerned with the designing and selling of clothes and those members of the press whose business it was to report them' in order to determine what action was needed to ensure optimum publicity for the London dressmakers.<sup>322</sup> From this point onwards, the way the dressmakers presented their January and July collections demonstrates that this led to a new level of coordination and collaboration between the London couturiers and the press. For example, in response to the discussions held at this party the London

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<sup>319</sup> Isobel, 'Dress Designing as a Career for Women,' *BBC Radio Script*, 31 May 1928. (Isobel, fashion designer: papers c.1950-c.1988, Archive of Art and Design, AAD/1991/12)

<sup>320</sup> I cannot find any documentation that demonstrates that Isobel became a member of the Fashion Group of Great Britain or any account of why she did not become involved. She was however a member of the board of the British Colour Council, which (as this chapter will demonstrate) had a clear connection to the Group.

<sup>321</sup> Edwina Ehrman, 2004, p. 111

<sup>322</sup> *Fashion Group Bulletin*, January 1936 (FGIR, Box 125F.2)



couturiers immediately instigated specific press-shows that were shorter and took place, early in the week, in late morning slots.<sup>323</sup> The Fashion Group's call for the support and favourable promotion of the city's emergent couture industry was fortunate to coincide with the recently instigated political policy of positive propaganda discussed in Chapter 1. However, analysis of the press and magazine reportage that followed the cocktail party, suggests that it was this specific meeting that had an immediate effect on the positive mediation of both the designers' work and London's claim to fashion centre status. A direct response is evidenced in the pages of British *Vogue*, particularly in the two months that followed the party, where the magazine created the space to promote both the London dressmakers and their ability to predict the fashions for 1936. For instance, by February its editorial policy was altered to include reports of the London couture collections.

In many ways this recognition was also a response to the Fashion Group's 'calendar of events' of January 1936. This was a coordinated schedule of 'private-view' showroom presentations that did not clash, by eleven Mayfair dressmakers, alongside milliners and fabric manufacturers, specifically for foreign buyers.<sup>324</sup> Up until this point, competition amongst the London dress houses, due to the limited number of clients and the ease of plagiarism, saw many choose to show at exactly the same time as their immediate rivals. Transcripts of a meeting of the Fashion Group's Dress Subcommittee in November 1935 demonstrate that the 'calendar of events' was organised by Hartnell, who convinced his competitors that, in order to increase publicity and export potential, coordinated presentations to the press and foreign buyers made perfect business sense. Hartnell may well have operated England's largest and most internationally recognised dress house, suggesting that he had little need to cooperate with his rivals, however he was now only London-based, as he had ceased showing his collections in Paris the previous year, therefore he had a vested interest in encouraging cooperation amongst the London dress world. In July 1935 showing only in London he had found that his presence was not enough to draw American buyers away from Paris. London dressmakers needed to present a united front, as he pointed out to his rivals, 'the

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> The English firms co-operating in the 'Calendar of Events' were: Norman Hartnell, Reville (Edward Symonds), Victor Stiebel, Reville-Terry, Ronald Morrel, Digby Morton, Genne Glenny, Peter Russell, Eva Lutyens, Matilda Etches, Henry Bridburg, and the milliners Aage Thaarup, and Derek Skeffington. (FGIR, Box 125F.2)

American public will never see or be aware of London fashion if the store buyers do not come, en mass, to London during their Parisian buying trips'.<sup>325</sup>

In Paris, the Chambre Syndicale ensured that foreign buyers' visits were smooth and uncomplicated, organising elements such as the show times, the preparation and dissemination of press releases and the models' shipping dates. This coordination, as a *Tobé Fashion Report* from 1940 illustrates, allowed Paris to give American manufacturers 'snob appeal for the least financial expenditure and effort' and American buyers went there because they received 'a great deal for their money. It was easy, it was organised, and it was fun'.<sup>326</sup> A ten-day trip to Paris for a buyer would cost approximately \$1,000, according to this source, and in that time they would be able to see around 4,000 original models. This carefully coordinated and mutually beneficial system had ensured that the American fashion industry (until the economic depression of the 1930s) was happy to remain dependent on Paris for model design and inspiration.<sup>327</sup> London, in comparison, was small-scale and unorganised. To secure a much sought after place on the American buyers' schedule and present a beneficial detour the city needed a couture industry that not only produced original fashion designs but was also clearly defined and organised.

The timing of the separate January 1936 collections preceding the Paris shows, was dictated by the American Fashion Group, which also ensured that news of the 'calendar of events' was widely disseminated and that London was included in the buyers' itinerary and travel arrangements. British press reports may have claimed that the timings allowed London to 'have the first go at the dollars' and sell its clothes before its French counterpart, yet this was not really the case, as few buyers purchased London models until after they had seen everything Paris had to offer.<sup>328</sup> The timing of the English collections may have been governed by the travel itinerary of the American buyers but it also ensured that they allocated part of their budget for London models and did not spend it all in Paris. The timing was also symbolic, as up until this point, the London dressmakers had shown their small collections after Paris, which left them open

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<sup>325</sup> *Notes on the First Fashion Group of Great Britain Dress Subcommittee Meeting*, November 1935 (FGIR, Box 125.f.2 – 13)

<sup>326</sup> 'New York Becomes the Natural Fashion Centre of the World,' *Tobé Fashion Reports*, 3 October 1940, p. 18

<sup>327</sup> Caroline Reynolds Milbank, *New York Fashion: The Evolution of American Style* (New York: Harry N. Abrams 1989) p.105. The use of Paris as the source of fashion, as discussed in Chapter 1, became more complicated after the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the consequential implementation of trade tariffs in 1932.

<sup>328</sup> Phillida, 'London Dressmakers Will Catch The U.S. Buyers,' *Sunday Dispatch*, January 1936 (VSPA/ADD/1994)

to the accusation that they merely copied French dictates. The earlier schedule therefore acted as a sign of English design confidence.

Unfortunately, the death of King George V within days of the scheduled showings threw the first concerted effort to present London as a fashion centre into chaos.<sup>329</sup> Full court mourning was instigated, which continued until July and half mourning until October and the dressmakers were inundated by orders from their regular clients for appropriate clothing. Despite the arrival of a substantial number of foreign buyers many of the London couturiers had to cancel their shows or withdraw certain creations. For example, Hartnell received many orders from royalty and his entire show was abandoned, whilst Stiebel went ahead with a private view for buyers as planned but as a sign of respect withdrew all court, wedding, and formal occasion dresses.<sup>330</sup>

Two months earlier at the British Fashion Group's first Dress Subcommittee meeting, when the Editor of *Harper's Bazaar* had requested a collaborative dress show, 'on the lines of the recent New York "Fashion Futures" [...] showing the quintessence of the English idea of fashion', all the dressmakers present had rejected the idea. The Secretary, Margaret Havinden, even offered reassurance that this form of event would misrepresent the aims of the British Fashion Group as it would 'lose sight of the fact' that it was 'wider than one for dress fashions only'.<sup>331</sup> The death of the King, however, left many dress houses with unsold models and out-of-pocket expenses as it disrupted the presentation of London fashion to American buyers. This meant that there was a need to demonstrate what the city had to offer to ensure these industry representatives returned for the next season's collections. Four months later, as a direct consequence, ten London dressmakers provided original models for the joint showcase onboard the Queen Mary's maiden voyage. The first joint collection of London couture, which contained many of the models created for the American buyers but not displayed as a consequence of national mourning, was therefore initiated by a particular series of events and business decisions that swiftly took the Fashion Group's couturiers from coordination to collaboration.

In January 1937, after the Queen Mary collection had eroded some of the Dress Subcommittee's reservations towards group presentations, thirteen London couturiers agreed to produce a twice-yearly design showcase exclusively for foreign buyers initially held at Claridge's hotel, with each dress house restricted to the presentation of six

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<sup>329</sup> King George V. died on the 20 January 1936; the shows were scheduled to start 3 days later.

<sup>330</sup> Anne Jeffery, 'From the British Fashion Front,' *Radio Pictorial*, London, March 1936 (HAA)

<sup>331</sup> *Fashion Group Bulletin*, January 1936 (FGIR, Box 125F.2)

models.<sup>332</sup> The decision to present a joint show in one public venue, rather than coordinate the showings at the separate dress houses, was taken despite the geographic proximity of these businesses, which, except for two members, operated premises in Mayfair, half of which were on Grosvenor Street. Industry and press reports took the joint shows as a clear demonstration of the London couturiers' readiness to accommodate and indulge the American buyers: *Draper's Record*, for instance, reported the fashion industry's appreciation of this 'pooling of pride', whilst the *News Chronicle* pointed out that it had taken 'modest English creators of fashion some time to discover that faint hearts never won fair American buyers'.<sup>333</sup> A collaborative showcase, despite such support for the idea, was a very different proposition to coordinated time slots at each dress house. Although reported as a prelude to the 'full collections for invited guests in the participants' own showrooms,' dressmakers such as Norman Hartnell, Edward Symonds at Reville and Peter Russell did not participate.<sup>334</sup> In a collaborative collection it was difficult for designers to differentiate their models from those of their competitors, negating their design autonomy and identity. A joint parade also exposed them to plagiarism by their closest competitors making many of the participants withhold their most creative garments. *Women's Wear Daily's* review of the first showcase highlighted these problems, for although it congratulated the London 'couturiers for their joint initiative' and for 'attracting the majority of the American model buyers', it also criticised the design of the clothes on display as 'patchy' and claimed that there were only 'one or two originators worth watching'.<sup>335</sup>

Despite initial difficulties the collaborative shows were an informed business reaction to America's modern commercial culture, which demanded speed and efficiency. Participation saw the elite dressmakers shift their practice to operate as designers for a foreign fashion industry rather than simply for individual clients. In so doing, they had to imagine not only the needs of American consumers but more importantly the judgments and discriminations of the American buyers and in effect, the

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<sup>332</sup> The designers/ dress houses involved were Hardy Amies at Lachasse, Mattli, Digby Morton, Victor Stiebel, Richard Busvine at Viola Redfern, Lady Earle at Winifred Mawdsley, The Hon. Mrs. Cripps at Robert Douglas, Genne Glenn, Motley, Alex Lord at Leathercraft, Rahvis, Rose Taylor, Teddy Tinling and the milliner Aage Thaarup, who acted as the Dress Subcommittee's chairman. *Fashion Group of Great Britain Bulletin*, March 1937 (ASA/GB/NNAF/P44076)

<sup>333</sup> Jane Gordon, 'London's New Fashions: Review of models sponsored by London Fashion Group', *News-Chronicle*, London, 9 February 1937 (HAA)

<sup>334</sup> 'London Fashion Group Show Starts Talk of Still Better Exhibition for Next July', *Women's Wear Daily*, 3 February 1937 (HAA)

<sup>335</sup> 'London Designers Confirm Plans for American Showings in July', *Women's Wear Daily*, 15 February 1937 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

edited joint collection was an attempt to do the buyers' job for them. Whilst in Paris, the industry representatives sent by manufacturers, department stores and dress houses, may well have viewed thousands of models each season, only a small minority of these were selected and only a fraction of those found popular acceptance in the American market.<sup>336</sup> It is clear that the ideas of one innovative couturier were not enough to stimulate, guide and authenticate a clear fashion trend; this evolved through the mechanism of collective selection, when fashion intermediaries, such as magazine editors and department store buyers, detected and promoted similar ideas within the separate collections. London's collective couture showcase condensed this process which the sociologist Herbert Blumer has called 'the fashion mechanism': the intense process of collective selection, where buyers made well-informed choices from the individual designer's competing styles in order to 'preordain as yet indistinct and inarticulate newer tastes'.<sup>337</sup>

Control of the 'fashion mechanism' was the central objective of the British Fashion Group, which aimed to put the power to direct the market in the hands of its country's creative practitioners; so that indigenous designers rather than foreign buyers would act as the 'agents of the incipient tastes of a fashion consuming public' and through their choices 'set the fashion'.<sup>338</sup> This process was made apparent in *Draper's Record's* review of the first London showcase, which noted 'a higher degree of unanimity in line, colour and style than there has been for years', a factor it claimed would help the industry by 'simplifying the job of wholesaler, designer, and manufacturer'.<sup>339</sup> The fact that the designs shown in the joint collection were not merely produced at the personal discretion of the couturiers but rather through a highly coordinated selection process, is made apparent by a survey of the joint collection's press reports, where it becomes evident particularly in their synchronisation of fabric and colour. For example, at the second show in July 1937, *The Sphere* (the weekly illustrated newspaper aimed at British citizens based in the colonies) noted that all the London designers had left the industry 'in no doubt that plaids are in for a great burst of popularity'.<sup>340</sup> The most notable aspect of many other reviews was their repetition of the separate designers' use

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<sup>336</sup> Blaszczyk, 2012, p. 174

<sup>337</sup> Herbert Blumer, 'Fashion: From Class Differentiation to Collective Selection', *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 10, Issue 3, 1968, pp. 275 – 291 (278)

<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

<sup>339</sup> 'London Collections Reviewed,' *Draper's Record*, October 1936 (VSPA/ADD/1994)

<sup>340</sup> 'London as a Fashion Centre: American Buyers No Longer Go Direct To Paris. They See London Collections First', *The Sphere*, 14 August 1937 (VSPA/ADD/1994)

of the same colour palette: green and browns, overlaid with plums and blues and in many cases bright flecks and strips of purples and pinks.<sup>341</sup> The influence of plaids and these specific colours are demonstrated by *Vogue's* coverage of this collection which, under the heading 'Prophetic Preview of Tweeds for the North and the Future', offered an indication of the particular importance of colour as a harmonising fulcrum within both the separate collections and the Fashion Group's trend forecasts (Figure 40).

The high level of colour coordination evident in the reports of the Fashion Group's couture showcase points to the fact that this was neither arbitrary nor solely determined by the designers. It has not previously been recognised, yet archival material has shown that this form of design synchronisation was the direct result of a link established with the British Colour Council (BCC). There is little official documentation of this organisation, however material held in Board of Trade records shows that it was an independent, not for profit body, with no official government connection, created in 1930 and supported by the subscriptions of just over 800 members.<sup>342</sup> Its main purpose was to manage chromatic change, standardise and forecast the use of colour, remove confusion and variation from its nomenclature and replace, with a degree of certainty, the speculative element in colour decisions. To achieve this the BCC produced a *Dictionary of Colour Standards*, which recorded, named, numbered and coded 220 colours. The *Dictionary* was then used to inform its *Colour Cards*, which sponsored a specific number of colours each season. These were created to guide designers, producers and retailers and were applicable not only to dress but also to a range of design industries such as ceramics, furnishings and even domestic appliances. The Colour Council's main objective, in many ways mirrored those of the British Fashion Group as at its base was a national agenda to ensure that Britain could take control of the international market's seasonal colours and thereby ensure that its products gained a lead over their competitors.

Seasonal shade cards were not a new idea, as they had been produced in Paris and distributed abroad since the late nineteenth century.<sup>343</sup> However by the 1930s, particularly across the American market, colour management had reached a new level of control and regulation. For an unstable industry guided by seasonal demand, the

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<sup>341</sup> M. Corey, 'Fall Fashions in High Style from London', *Journal Providence R. I.* 1 August 1937 (HAA). These were the colours that this article, alongside many others, saw as dominant within the clothes, hats and shoes presented at the joint collection in July 1937.

<sup>342</sup> Mr. A. Hoskins, *Board of Trade letter to the Office of the High Commissioner for Canada*, 20 November 1936. (BT64)

<sup>343</sup> Błaszczuk, 2012, p.39

## Prophetic preview of tweeds for the North - and the future



Figure 40: 'Prophetic Preview of Tweeds for the North and the Future',  
Vogue, 21 July 1937



dissemination of authoritative guidelines for future colour trends was a commercial imperative, as it alleviated one of the main risks faced by manufacturers and distributors of fashion stock, as 'fully one third of all price "markdowns" in the ready to wear and accessory lines was due to color alone'.<sup>344</sup> The American Fashion Group constantly promoted the idea that 'an ensembled color coordinated supply of merchandise in the market' was the most successful ways to increase retailers' profits.<sup>345</sup> With colour management an important component within the market coordination strategies of the American Fashion Group it was therefore sure to have been transposed to its British branch.

An initial indication that the British Colour Council played a role within the Fashion Group's couture presentations was a November 1935 interview in *Draper's Record*, with Robert Wilson (the BCC's General Manager). Here he claimed that 'the power' to authenticate the seasonal 'fashion-first, prestige colours' still emanated from Paris and set out his conviction that Britain's 'future fashion plan should begin with better class firms [...and] above all the present need is for dressmakers, brilliant people with ability to bring out the full beauties of colour and make it famous'.<sup>346</sup> For the Colour Council, a creative, highly visible and coordinated London couture industry was an important element within the authentication of its work and Fashion Group transcripts verify that one-month prior to this interview Wilson had attended the inaugural lunch. The Group's aims clearly resonated with the Colour Council's objectives, and this newly established network of creative practitioners presented an opportunity that Wilson could not afford to ignore.

The vivid, coordinated colour palette of the couturiers' joint showcases in 1937, offered a specific indication that the Colour Council had become involved in the Fashion Group's work. A comparison of its seasonal *Colour Chart* and the clothes presented provides proof that the dressmakers had worked with the Council's colour stipulations.<sup>347</sup> On its own, this evidence only indicates the couturiers' and textile manufacturers' awareness of the Council's work rather than an active alliance. However, material in the

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<sup>344</sup> 'Coordinating a Color Chart', talk given by the manager of the merchandising division of the National Retail Dry Goods Association at the New York Fashion Group's monthly meeting, 20 January 1932 (FGIR, Box 72 F.6) The NRDGA represented most of the larger and influential stores in the country.

<sup>345</sup> This is demonstrated in a number of speeches given to the Fashion Group members in New York (FGIR Box 72 F.6)

<sup>346</sup> 'B.C.C.s Scoop For Spring, Chinese Colours: "We Are The First To Produce These Colours," says Mr. R. F. Wilson', *Draper's Record*, 2 November 1935 (ASA/GB/NNAF/P44076)

<sup>347</sup> In 1937, the Fashion Group of Great Britain created its own *Colour Chart* that it reported to the Board of Trade sold well in America. I have not found copies of these, but the fact that the dominant colours of those in the joint collections matched many of those in the BCC's Charts suggests that the colours were similar.



Fashion Group Archive in New York demonstrates a formal collaboration, as it holds examples from 1938 of *The Colour Chart of the Fashion Group of Great Britain in cooperation of the British Colour Council* produced for foreign buyers, whilst it also documents the concurrent display of fabrics by the Group's Dress Fabrics Sub-Committee that were 'dyed to the eight sponsored fashion colours' and used by the couturiers.<sup>348</sup>

Historical accounts of the British Colour Council are unaccountably missing from the documentation of the British fashion industry.<sup>349</sup> Yet, research demonstrates that it not only played a fundamental role in the Fashion Group of Great Britain but that it also exerted considerable influence over a broad spectrum of the British textile and fashion industry. In March 1940, for example, Donald Barber, secretary of the powerful Retail Distribution Association, told Mass Observation that the British fashion industry was 'in dire need of organisation' and that in his opinion, the only body that had 'any real influence' was the Colour Council.<sup>350</sup> The recollections of Alan Saville, an employee in the interwar silk trade, documented in the *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society* also highlighted the importance of the Council's guidelines in his claim that 'in those days the Paris fads and the dictates of the British Colour Council had to be followed'.<sup>351</sup>

Much of this influence can be attributed to the beneficial service the BCC offered to the commercial market. For both producers and retailers, authoritative colour forecasts removed an element of speculation from the system of supply and demand and facilitated continuous and increased production and distribution, which in turn raised profit margins. From its inception, the Colour Council also received substantial support from the national and trade press, which provided a vital link between fashion industry producers and consumers.<sup>352</sup> The BCC's *Annual Report* produced in May 1936 attributed much of its success not only to this network of mediation but also to a change

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<sup>348</sup> (FGIR, Box 72 F.6)

<sup>349</sup> There is not an official holding of archival material for the British Colour Council. This history has been pieced together by newspaper and magazine articles; correspondence with the Board of Trade; and evidence in the Settle and American Fashion Group Archives.

<sup>350</sup> 'Fashion Opinion Forming', Mass Observation documentation of phone conversation with Donald Barber, Retail Distribution Association, 10 March 1940 (MO/Box 2B) This association was particularly influential and had 80,000 members and represented approximately 200 establishments, these included a large variety of retail tailors, ordinary drapery establishments, all the small sized fashion, gown and millinery shops and a few big multiple organisations like C & A, Dorothy Perkins and Marks and Spencer.

<sup>351</sup> Alan Saville, 'Recollections of the Silk Trade, 1930 – 1940', *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society*, Number 27, 1993, pp. 86 -91

<sup>352</sup> By the end of that year the Council's activities were mentioned in over 700 articles in the British daily press and trade and fashion journals, and in nearly 100 foreign publications. See *Annual Report of the Board of Management of the British Colour Council*, Presented to the Members of the Council at the Fifth Annual General Meeting held on 14 May 1936 (BT64)

in design aesthetic, as it claimed the simplicity of modern design demanded an increased knowledge of the correct use of colour. The report also made reference to the recent expansion, particularly in London, of specialist dyeing companies, which thereby improved the skills of English dyers and the implementation of the BCC's directives.<sup>353</sup>

The Colour Council's influence and success can therefore be attributed to the fact that its work enhanced the commercial objectives of industry and responded to changes in both design and production, it also linked the members of the Fashion Group to an industrial, political and social network with particular influence. For instance, through the social connections of the Colour Council's patron Lord Derby (who was also patron of the Cotton Board and the future patron of the Incorporated Society), it was even able to use the royal family to 'inspire confidence' in its colour forecasts and 'discerning' taste.<sup>354</sup> In 1935, Derby persuaded the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester to support two official colours for their marriage ('Gloucester Green' and 'Kenya Red'). Whilst, for the previous year's British Industries Fair, Queen Mary christened a colour 'Jubilee,' the Duchess of York named one 'Margaret Rose' and the Duchess of Kent gave her name to 'Marina Green.'<sup>355</sup> The future Queen Elizabeth also accompanied Derby to a BIF parade of cotton dresses produced in these colours, which generated an 'unprecedented level' of press and consumer interest (Figure 41).<sup>356</sup>

The *Spring Colour Card* of 1936 was the first range of colours the Council promoted after it joined the British Fashion Group. The eight 'Chinese colours' it contained offer a pertinent example of how this network operated in order to control the market and influence the direction of fashion consumption.<sup>357</sup> These colours were

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<sup>353</sup> Dyeing establishments grew up in response to the McKenna Duties, which since the First World War imposed import tax of 33 percent on luxury goods, as un-dyed fabrics received a lower import tax companies were encouraged to have imported fabrics dyed in England.

<sup>354</sup> Annual Report, May 1936. Lord Derby, colloquially known as the 'King of Lancashire', was a Conservative politician and diplomat. He was Secretary of State during the First World War and British Ambassador to France between 1918 and 1920. He was also Patron of the Cotton Board, British Colour Council, Travel Association of Great Britain and the original Vice President of the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers. For further details see, Randolph S. Churchill, *Lord Derby 'King of Lancashire': The Official Life of Edward, Seventeenth Earl of Derby, 1865 – 1948* (London: Melbourne: Toronto: Heinemann, 1959)

<sup>355</sup> *Annual Report of the Board of Management of the British Colour Council*, Presented to the Members of the Council at the Fifth Annual General Meeting held on 14 May 1936 (BT64) Also see Mr. A. Hoskins, Board of Trade letter to the Office of the High Commissioner for Canada, 20 November 1936. (BT64)

<sup>356</sup> 'The White City, British Industries "show the world": The Duchess of York sees All- British fashion parade, mannequins, materials & models that Paris - at her best - could not excel.' *Pathé Films* 1934 and *Annual Report of the Board of Management of the British Colour Council*.

<sup>357</sup> Twenty-six colours were shown on the *Spring Wool Card* in November 1935, eight of these were the Chinese colours. These were all soft pastels based on pottery glazes; the silk shades were slightly different from those for cotton. Blues predominate, with reds, bluish greens, yellowish greens, warm browns and woody browns (these continued fashions begun the previous year) They all had different names: Imperial



Figure 41: (Top) Duchess of York and Lord Derby at the British Industries Fair, 1934  
(Bottom) Selection of BIF dresses dyed in British Colour Council Sponsored Colours. 1934

Stills taken from 'The White City, British Industries "show the world": The Duchess of York sees All-British fashion parade, mannequins, materials & models that Paris - at her best - could not excel', *Pathé*, 1934



Gold, Chinese Celadon Green, Majolica Blue, Lotus Bud (pastel pink) Nanking Blue, Flamingo (coral rose), Honey Gold, Peking Blue. (BT 64/15)

derived from the subtle glazes of the ceramics on display in the Royal Academy of Art's *International Exhibition of Chinese Art* held in London in November 1935.<sup>358</sup> The BCC therefore used informed speculation that this cultural event could be used to stimulate future aesthetic taste. Firstly these colours, launched just as state mourning commenced, are indicative of how a network of influence could bring stability to the market. The Council's *Annual Report* claims that in order to alleviate the impact the King's death had on this particular set of colour forecasts, Lord Derby secured a statement from the Palace that after a short official period of mourning the general public should wear 'subdued colours rather than black'.<sup>359</sup> The dissemination of this decree is verified by a number of press reports held in Board of Trade records that were released eleven days after the death of the King, which reassured the trade that their expensive outlay in stocks produced in 'the greyed hues of that season's Chinese Colours', would not be 'surplus to requirement'.<sup>360</sup>

Secondly, the Chinese colours offer clear evidence of how fashion intermediaries could then use these to authenticate their knowledge of fashion and direct future consumption. Throughout 1936, *Vogue* consistently promoted these colours, a clear example of how they were disseminated and validated. In February it informed its British readers that 'the greyed half-tones of the new Chinese colourings might have been specially evolved for this moment, so much in keeping are they with the subdued spirit of the times'.<sup>361</sup> One of its main articles 'Chinese Fashion Moves' also featured miniature dolls produced by members of the Fashion Group that were carved by the artist Angus McBean and clothed by Motley in fabrics of greyed blue, green and lavender shades from Harrods and Courtaulds (Figure 42). In the same month, *Vogue's* first *House and Garden* supplement extended these colours to designs for the interior (produced yet again by Fashion Group members) and pointed out that 'the Chinese exhibition at Burlington House already shows signs of influencing the new trend in decoration' (Figure 43). This continued in March when, 'a square shouldered wool suit in the cool, greyed celadon green of Chinese pottery' by the wholesale model house Ferndern Sports

<sup>358</sup> These colour cards were produced prior to the opening of the exhibition, as the Council was granted access to the exhibits in advance, a request made possible by the fact that the Colour Council's President, John A. Milne was also President of the Royal Society of Arts. (BT 64/15)

<sup>359</sup> *Annual Report of the Board of Management of the British Colour Council*, Presented to the Members of the Council at the Fifth Annual General Meeting held on 14 May 1936 (BT64/15)

<sup>360</sup> Robert Wilson based the reports on a Colour Council press release entitled 'Immediate & Future Trends in Colour: British Colour Council Press Release in response to the Death of the King', 30 January 1936 and the Board of Trade Archive holds versions of it in *The Times* and *Draper's Record*. (BT64/15)

<sup>361</sup> 'Fabricana,' *Vogue*, 19 February 1936, p. 24

moved the authentication of these colours on to the magazine's influential front cover (Figure 44). Even five months later, these colours were still apparent in the August cover's use of a 'crepe dress of the blue of Chinese porcelain' (Figure 45). This cover also promoted Elizabeth Arden's 'newly arrived Chinese makeup' thereby demonstrating the transference of these colour forecasts, by an international member of the Fashion Group, into the field of cosmetics. The clothes featured on the front cover demonstrate the use of these colours by wholesalers, yet it should also be noted that the much-publicised eveningwear Stiebel and Motley produced for the finale of the first Fashion Group joint show, a full year after these colours were released, were both reported to be of 'celadon' green (Figure 46). When aligned with Tinling's use of gold embroidery for this collection the colour of these gowns suggests that the production of fashion emanated from the influence of intermediaries in the Colour Council and Fashion Group, rather than purely from the couturiers' own creativity agency.

The influence of the Colour Council on the work of the London couturiers can also be seen in the coordinated use of a strong colour palette in the Fashion Group's July 1937 dress show. This included many models in rich colour combinations, particularly the tweed daywear, which was woven in colourful flecks or checks. Many reports in American newspapers then used the couturier's adoption of a brighter colour palette to promote a new sensibility in London dress design. For example, *The New York Times* described the suits as 'a welcome change from the Oxford grays, the tans and dull browns one used to expect the well-tailored English woman to wear [...] now the tweeds are overlaid with rainbow checks'.<sup>362</sup> In the realm of British class distinction, bright colours were often considered vulgar and the social elite traditionally demonstrated their taste through a preference for subtlety; what the American Fashion Group *Bulletin* criticized as 'the gray scotch heather type of thing'.<sup>363</sup> The clothes produced for the joint showcase were not however destined for consumption by the London dressmaker's British clients but by foreign buyers. It is significant that the July 1937 *Colour Chart* issued by the Fashion Group was 'taken up with enthusiasm in America' and the treasurer reported a profit on their sale.<sup>364</sup> The bolder use of colour was an illustration of not only the dressmakers' but also the Colour Council's compliance with the needs and

<sup>362</sup> 'English Designers Show Attractive Sports Clothes,' *The New York Times*, 23 August 1937 (Digby Morton Press Books, Victoria and Albert Museum, henceforth DMPB)

<sup>363</sup> Sara Pennoyer (the Publicity Director of Bonwit Teller department store) *Fashion Group Bulletin*, August 1937 (FGIR X, Box 73: 1938 – 1941) For further information on how elite taste rejected bright colours see David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (Reaktion Books, 2000)

<sup>364</sup> *Fashion Group Bulletin*, December 1937 (Box 73. F.1)



Figure 42: (Top) 'Chinese Fashion Moves,' *Vogue*, 19 February 1936

Figure 43: (Bottom) 'Chinese Accents,' *Vogue's House and Garden Supplement*, 19 February 1936



Figure 44: *Vogue*, 18 March 1936

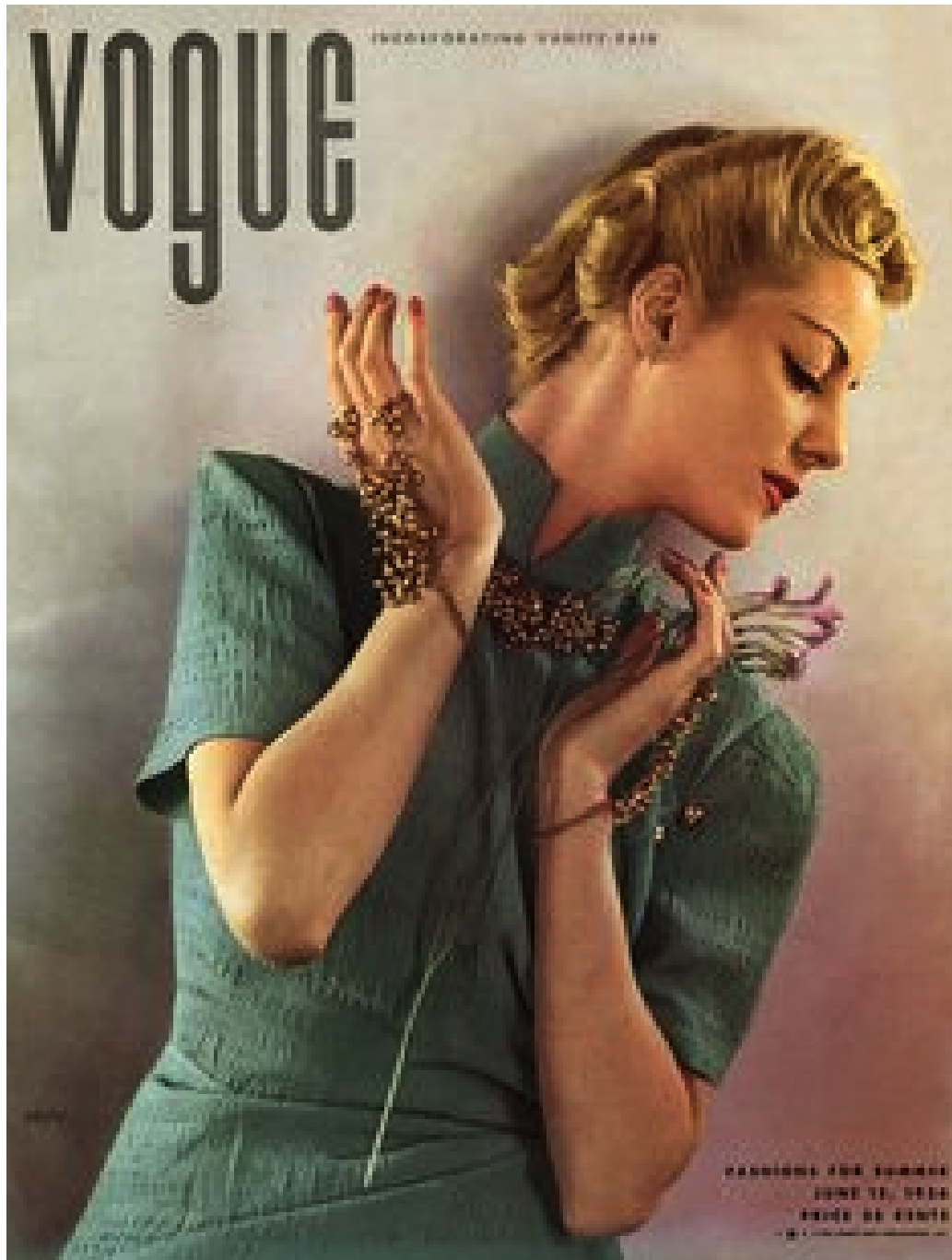


Figure 45: *Vogue*, 19 August 1936



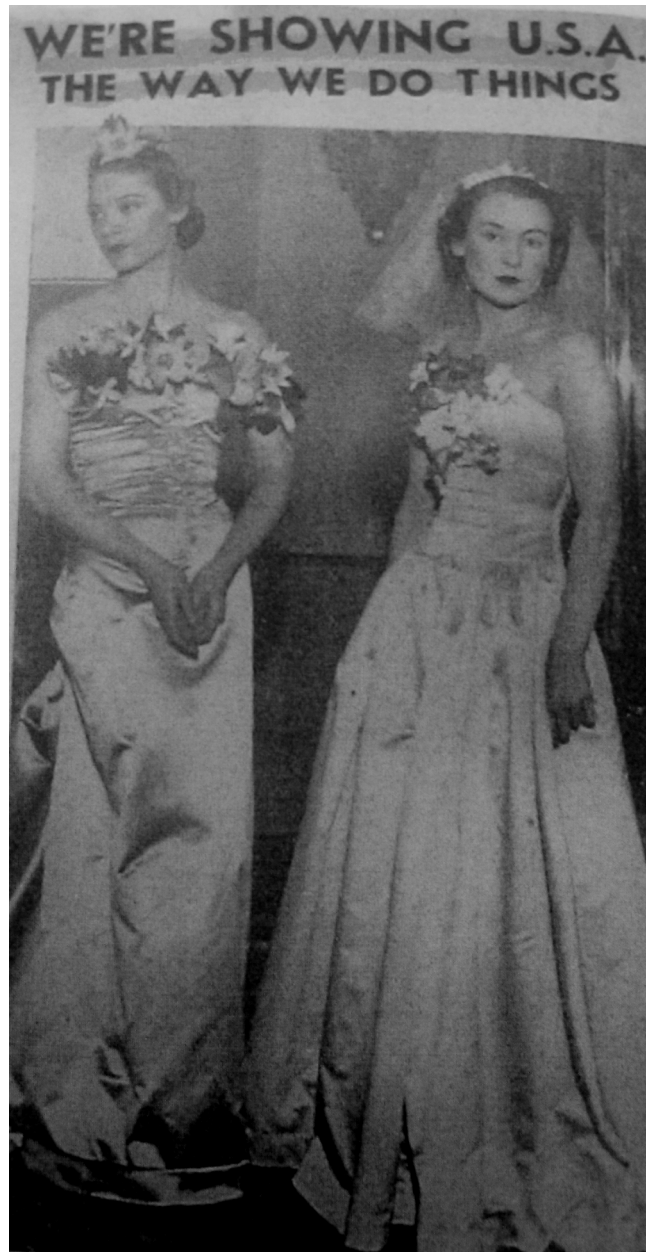


Figure 46: Models from the third Fashion Group show,  
*Manchester Daily Sketch*, 27 January 1937  
(Left) Motley Couture  
(Right) Victor Stiebel

dictate of the American mass market, where the noted preference for 'punch' (the use of bright colours and strong contrasts) was a prevalent taste.<sup>365</sup>

In July 1937, the adoption of bold colours was discernable in the London couturiers' joint showcase and also in many of the concurrent Parisian collections. For example, that season as part of her 'Exposition Colors', Schiaparelli (a key international member of the Fashion Group who attended meetings in London, Paris and New York) produced the most famous example: 'Shocking Pink'. For example, Vogue advised its readers that her collection was 'full of shocks – not least the country clothes in blazing purple and “shocking” pink.' While the use of bright colours may have been aimed at the American market the magazine also encouraged its British readers to 'take your colours strong [...] any Paris Couturier will show you how: Schiaparelli, Molyneux, Chanel, Maggy Rouff, Creed, Lelong, and Lanvin' (Figure 48).

When the 'shocking' collection is considered alongside the 'rainbow' colours of the London dressmakers a preordained fashion trend coordinated across national boundaries by the separate branches of the Fashion Group is made apparent. The use of vivid colours in both London and Paris is therefore indicative, not of an inexplicable convergence of fashion designers' ideas or a coincidental example of a dress artist's ability to capture the essence of the zeitgeist. Instead it represents a level of fashion coordination that can ultimately be traced back not just to the British Colour Council but also more specifically to the needs of the American consumer market. The focus on the use of colour offers a clear example of how in the 1930s the Fashion Group of Great Britain established a network of official tastemakers that began to guide production, promotion and consumption not just at the mass level but also at the elite level of the fashion market. The couturier's participation in the joint showcase therefore saw their designs become part of a broader system of fashion production, which in turn increased their industrial relevance. In so doing, London gained credibility as a fashion centre as it became a destination for not only original but also coordinated design.

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<sup>365</sup> Błaszczyk, 2012, p. 40 – 41



Figure 48: 'Her [Schiaparelli's] Purple and Pink Palette,' *Vogue: Paris Fashions* 2, 15 September 1937

### **2:3) The Sporting Nation: Design Synchronisation and a Narrative for English Couture (1937 – 1938)**

Like America, England is developing fashions of her own. Long famous for wonderful tailoring and a way with rugged sports clothes, London is now invading the French field of more feminine dressmaking creating many models of cosmopolitan smartness. [In the Queen Mary Showcase] there was great emphasis on the tailored type of evening costume [...] which would indicate that London is bidding for some of the American dress business. For it has long been noted that the tailored evening costume – popular in Paris and even more popular in this country – has very little acceptance in London. Englishwomen like dressier, fussier clothes. It is to be assumed, then, that such frocks as those illustrated here were designed solely for American admiration and American dollars.<sup>366</sup>

When the first collaborative collection of London couture arrived in New York onboard the Queen Mary many newspaper reports were quick to congratulate their adherence to the taste of the American consumer. The collection included a range of garments from ‘hard’ sportswear to ‘soft’ eveningwear, in order to demonstrate that London was now a fully-fledged fashion centre that both understood and could cater to the needs of the American market. Press reports, which claimed that the models were designed specifically for the current taste of the North American market, suggest that intermediaries within the Fashion Group had guided their design. For example, the tailored evening dress, which the *Baltimore Sun* highlighted as the most obvious concession to American taste, was particularly prevalent in Stiebel's contribution. Figure 49, his simply cut, black silk dinner dress, with a multi-colour striped satin jacket, fitted to the waist with leg-o-mutton sleeves and large belt tied in a bow, was one of the most publicised of the showcase's outfits. The simplicity of the dress coupled with a distinctive jacket gave it an element of fashionable adaptability as it could be worn together, or separated and mixed with other clothes from the consumer's own wardrobe. This type of outfit was ‘much admired by an American audience who were versed at placing individuality, through adaptation of models in their dress sense’.<sup>367</sup> In terms of daywear, the outfit that was given the most exposure was ‘*Before October*’, a two-tone mohair

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<sup>366</sup> ‘London Fashions Via The Queen Mary: British Dress Houses Submit Models To America; *The Sun*, Baltimore, June 1936 (HAA)

<sup>367</sup> Ibid.



Figure 49: Victor Stiebel's much publicised evening wear, produced for the January 1936 American buyers coordinated collections and included in the Queen Mary Showcase May 1936  
 (Top Left) 'Queen Mary Brings Newest Fashions From England' *The New York Times*, June 1936  
 (Top Right) 'Interpretations on a Theme: Stiebel's challenge to the traditional décolletage with the dinner jacket for evening', *Vogue* 19 February 1936  
 (Bottom) 'From the Fashion Fronts of London, Paris and Hollywood,' syndicated article in *Times Jacksonville*, *News Cleveland Ohio*, June 1936, *Times Star Cincinnati* July 1936

tweed suit by Hardy Amies at Lachasse (Figure 50). The novel cut of this suit is an indication that it was also designed as a deliberate appeal to the American buyer, particularly its large suede belt that was worked into the construction of the jacket. This design feature offered both a distinctive model for reproduction and also, as the waistline could be pulled in for a better fit, assisted the sizing of ready-made models.<sup>368</sup> Both Stiebel's eveningwear and Amies' suit are therefore good examples of the English couturiers' attempt to design specifically for the needs of the American market.<sup>369</sup>

Yet, to support London's claim to fashion centre status it is apparent that there was also a need for the city's dress designers to demonstrate national distinction. For example, this is made evident in the reports on Edward Symonds designs, which were all for debutante dress and promoted as inherently English. As president of the British Fashion and Fabrics Bureau and former vice-president of the British Colour Council, Symonds was a prolific promoter and supporter of the collaborative links between innovative fashion designers and fabric manufacturers. At the House of Reville he operated as a specialist dealer in original and exclusive designs for both dress models and fabrics and his belief that if London led 'in fashion' it could then 'lead in fabric' was often reported.<sup>370</sup> When invited, as organiser of the Queen Mary showcase, to give a talk to the New York Fashion Group's board and officers, he made it clear that the uniqueness of British dress came specifically from its use of British fabric. He therefore made particular reference to the fact that all his gowns were created in British velvet in 'traditional coronation colours' that took skilled workers 'a week to weave a yard'. This promotional narrative saw Symonds astutely align his work with both British pageantry and craftsmanship.<sup>371</sup> In so doing, he emphasized the idiosyncratic nature of London dressmaking and used the forthcoming coronation to give a national inflection to this promotion of British fashion and textiles.

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<sup>368</sup> Phillida, 'London Dressmakers Will Catch The U.S. Buyers,' *Sunday Dispatch*, January 1936 (VSPA/ADD/1994). Prior to the showcase, in December 1935, Hartnell was invited to New York by the American Fashion Group to study the market and evaluate American taste. This informed the garments chosen for presentation (VSPA/ADD/1994).

<sup>369</sup> 'British – U.S. Interchange of Abilities Urged: Great Possibilities in Relation-ships of American Ready to Wear and British Styles and Fabrics, says E.H. Symonds', *Women's Wear Daily*, June 1936 (VSPA/ADD/1994).

<sup>370</sup> See for example; Edward Symonds, 'Who Creates Fashions?' *The Strait Times*, 8 July 1933, p. 15 <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/>

<sup>371</sup> *The Fashion Group Bulletin*, Volume Two, Number Six, June 1936, p. 2. (FGIR box 125.f.2 – 13) For an example of how Reville promoted British fabric see the Pathé Film Newsreel, *The Latest in Afternoon Gowns by Reville*, 15 June 1933, <http://www.britishpathe.com/results.php?search=reville>.





Figure 50: Hardy Amies' *Before October* suit for the Queen Mary showcase. Model photographed in front of the new liner, *The New York Times*, May 1936

Whilst the death of the King George V may have disrupted the Fashion Group's coordinated showings in January 1936, the consequential coronation of George VI in May 1937 (after the intervening abdication crisis) offered an inimitable opportunity to promote London as a Fashion Centre.<sup>372</sup> In January 1937, as the Fashion Group held its first collaborative dress show, *The Daily Sketch*, in an article entitled 'London Steals a March on Paris' assured its British readers that because of this royal event the London 'dressmakers would be introduced not only to the smart well-dressed leaders of society and fashion in America and the Continent but also to hundreds who have never seen us or our Island before'.<sup>373</sup> New travel and communication technology and the heightened public interest caused by the infamous abdication of Edward VII, certainly made this coronation the most viewed and followed royal event up to that date. Furthermore, for the Mayfair dressmakers, the Earl Marshal's decree that for the first time court dress rather than the traditional kirtle could be worn under the female guests' coronation robes, ensured that this event was not only highly visible but also offered a platform for the demonstration of original fashion design.<sup>374</sup> For its fashion pages, American newspapers took full advantage of the opportunity this created to turn the coronation into a source of glamorous spectacle. Figure 51, offers a clear example of the type of reportage that ensued. Taken from Boston's *Christian Science Monitor* it depicted the peeresses as fashion mannequins more applicable to the cinema screen or the pages of *Vogue* than the aisles of Westminster Abbey.

The programme the Fashion Group produced for its first London-based dress show illustrates that this promotion took full advantage of the forthcoming coronation. Drawn in gold on a black background, its front cover had a crown in the top left hand corner and a sketch of a fashionable modern woman in a back-less gown overlaid on a drawing of a peeress in traditional mantle and bonnet (Figure 52). Inside, the description of the models demonstrates that the collection was dominated by afternoon, cocktail, and evening dress. *Women's Wear Daily* reported that the buyers who attended this show were most interested in the 'clothes for grand occasions and coronation ceremonies' and appreciated 'anything with a coronation tie-in [... particularly] evening

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<sup>372</sup> King George V. died on 20 January 1936, and his oldest son ascended to the throne as King Edward VIII, during the period of mourning he was not crowned. He remained king for 235 days, abdicating on the 11 December 1936, to marry the twice-divorced American Wallis Simpson. His brother whose coronation as King George VI took place on the 12 May 1937 succeeded him.

<sup>373</sup> Modestina, 'London steals a march on Paris,' *The Daily Sketch*, January 1937 (VSPA/ADD/1994)

<sup>374</sup> 'Peeresses Welcome Coronation Dress Plan,' *Daily Mail*, October 1936 (HAA)





Figure 51: 'As Dress Designers See it,' *Christian Science Monitor*, Boston, Mass. 22 April 1937  
Left to right designs by Hadley Seymour, Worth and Stiebel



Figure 52: The Programme for the first Fashion Group of Great Britain Dress Show for foreign buyers, January 1937

gowns prepared for peeresses to wear under their robes and wedding gowns for coronation season brides'.<sup>375</sup> This saw the London couturiers' bridal wear quickly replace Parisian wedding dresses in many American publications. For example *Brides* magazine featured an 'unusual' Stiebel model (Figure 53), made from alternate stripes of reversible satin, a 'stately gown' which it claimed embodied 'all the charm of the English Bride and all the glamour of a coronation year wedding'.<sup>376</sup> The coronation therefore not only brought the London couturiers intense public interest and recognition it also provided the opportunity to demonstrate the diversity of their design capability and show that as a fashion centre London could provide garments that ranged from the practical to the spectacular.

Despite this recognition of London as a source of innovative and glamorous fashion, the Fashion Group's second joint show (a month after the coronation) saw the industry's important trade papers quickly reject London's presentation of 'soft' dressmaking. Despite reports of good sales, *Women's Wear Daily* now claimed critics had questioned 'why London had to show dresses of this type, however lovely, when Americans only wanted to look at tweeds'.<sup>377</sup> *Draper's Record* also declared that the buyers came to Britain 'for things they can't get in New York or Paris, sportswear in tweed or leather, and a few dinner dresses and negligees [...] America expects from Britain garments, which are smart, exquisitely tailored, but have none of the eye-catching qualities of Parisian clothes'.<sup>378</sup> The coronation may have presented the Fashion Group with the opportunity to demonstrate that London could compete with Paris and produce extravagant, glamorous clothes applicable to the American market. However, the comments of industry trade journals offer clear indication that within the constructed idea of international fashion production there was an expectation that the London couturiers adhere to a specific design narrative. In particular it was the assumption of the American fashion industry that London should be promoted as the centre of elegant sportswear and most specifically the town and country suit.

Many of the press reports of the Fashion Group's July 1937 dress show correspond with the opinion of the industry's main trade journals and ignored the evening wear of designers such as Tinling and Motley and primarily focused on the daywear of Morton, Russell, and Amies. This was invariably based on 'perfectly tailored,'

<sup>375</sup> 'London Designers confirm Plans for American Showings in July', *Women's Wear Daily*, 15 February 1937 (HAA)

<sup>376</sup> 'English Brides' *Brides Magazine* (America), Summer 1937 (VSPA/ADD/1994)

<sup>377</sup> *Women's Wear Daily*, 15 February 1937 (VSPA/ADD/1994)

<sup>378</sup> 'Styles American Buyers at West End', *Drapers' Record*, 24 July 1937 (HAA)

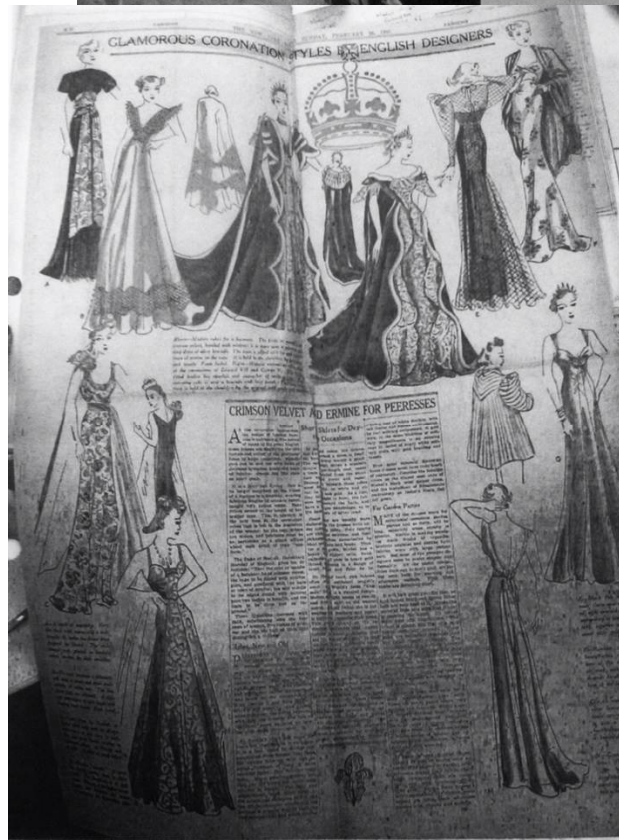


Figure 53: (Top) Victor Stiebel wedding dress, 'English Brides' *Brides Magazine* (America) Summer 1937

Figure 54: (Bottom) 'Glamorous Coronation Styles by English Designers,' *The New York Times*, 28 February 1937

four-piece ensembles with colour-matched crepe blouse, tweed jacket and skirt and topcoat.<sup>379</sup> Press reports indicate a certain level of uniformity within these models, for example, the suits were all described as slim lined, with skirts cut to give freedom of movement, and fitted with single-breasted jackets with unexaggerated shoulders that finished at the hipbone. In spite of this, *Women's Wear Daily* declared that they were 'saved from monotony' by 'nice individual details'.<sup>380</sup> For instance, Motley was noted for its use of aspects from Highland costumes; Peter Russell for a distinctive flap treatment for his slim fitting skirts; and Digby Morton for his combination of metal with tweed. It was therefore restrained design features rather than spectacular styling that caught the eye of fashion commentators. However, a number of the designers then used topcoats to incorporate an element of novelty. These counteracted the subtlety of the suits and appear to have been produced to generate as much interest as possible and attract the attention of the buyers and fashion press. Peter Russell, for instance, presented an unusual flared coat, inspired by London's hansom cab drivers' jackets, which he christened 'The Cabby,' while Lachasse had 'The Bulky,' an exaggerated tweed coat, which hung straight and boxlike to the hip, with broad shoulders that spanned twenty inches across (Figure 55).

By July 1937, with the Coronation over, it was both colour coordination and the prevalence of four-piece tailored outfits with conservative cut, subtle details, and flamboyant coats, which allowed a clear design theme to emerge in the London Fashion Group showings. In terms of colour, the designers presented not only brighter palettes, but ensured that aspects such as the blouses, jacket linings, saddle stitching on the seams, leather edges on pockets and belts were often colour matched to a prominent thread in the weave of each suit's fabric (Figure 56).<sup>381</sup> These multiple garments adhered to the concept of ensemble dressing based on colour harmony. This was a style of dress first articulated by Parisian couturiers, but turned into a mass-market merchandising concept by the American fashion industry.<sup>382</sup> So much so, that by the 1930s, the

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<sup>379</sup> 'London as a Fashion Centre: American buyers no longer go direct to Paris. They see London collections first', *The Sphere*, 14 August 1937 (VSPA/ADD/1994)

<sup>380</sup> 'Fitted Jacket Suits with Related topcoats bought by English Socialites and American Trade Buyers,' *Women's Wear Daily*, 15 September 1937 (HAA)

<sup>381</sup> "Bulkies" Hip length Tweed Coats Over Suits, News at Lachasse,' *Women's Wear Daily*, 14 July 1937 (HAA)

<sup>382</sup> For further details of the importance of the ensemble wardrobe in America in the interwar period see Blaszczyk, 2012, p. 172



# SPORTS CLOTHES



Figure 55: 'London Sports Clothes,' *The New York Times*, 22 August 1937  
Report on the London Fashion Group's joint show (Left) Lachasse's 'Bulky' (Right) Peter Russell's 'Cabby'



Figure 56: Victor Stiebel Colour Matched Ensemble with Tweed woven in cyclamen and violet checks over green base, July 1937

ensemble wardrobe was 'a practical necessity for intelligent customer service and was generally adopted by all well-merchandised stores throughout the country'.<sup>383</sup> The Fashion Group's focus on colour-matched separates is therefore a clear indication that the Mayfair dressmakers' design process was guided by an informed awareness of the expectations and needs of the American market. The Fashion Group may have wanted to demonstrate that London could lead in fashion and control the direction of fashion however in order to construct a specific market position it needed a clear collaborative narrative. This came in the form of the colour matched tailored ensemble.

By January 1938, the collaborative Fashion Group dress show was therefore predominated by suits, some in the sports category but the majority 'tweeds-for-town.' Even if the couturiers tried to push the definition of sportswear the majority of journalists overlooked this. 'Blue Palm' (Figure 57), a beach ensemble, which Victor Stiebel included in this show offers a clear example of how models, which did not conform to the narrative of elegant and restrained tweeds for town, were often ignored: as only *Women's Wear Daily* picked out this particular outfit for publication. The more typical presentation of this London show can be seen in Madge Garland's report on it for *Vogue*. As the new chairman of the British Fashion Group she presented a carefully selected narrative of London design, which disregarded everything except the couturiers' 'streamlined' suits. Through the medium of line drawing, the illustrations that accompanied this 'Preview' (Figures 58 - 60) in their focus on structured jackets, plainness, stripes or checks and tailored panels accentuated the idea of simplicity, and thereby reinforced the narrative of restrained and elegant uniformity. Yet in these 'advance notes on the designer's main spring trends', Garland protected the couturiers' creative autonomy through her claim that 'the handling, the detail, the fine subtleties, are of course, as diverse and individual as the personalities of the designers themselves'.<sup>384</sup> In this careful balance of both conformity and individuality, reports such as Garland's are indicative of both the Fashion Group's selection process and their aim to produce mass 'fashion'.<sup>385</sup> This is a design form that values both standardisation and novelty, a paradox that allows consumers to both conform to the dress codes of their social group

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<sup>383</sup> 'Coordinating a Color Chart' talk given by the manager of the merchandising division of the National Retail Dry Goods Association at the New York Fashion Group's monthly meeting, 20 January 1932 (FGIR, Box 72 F.6)

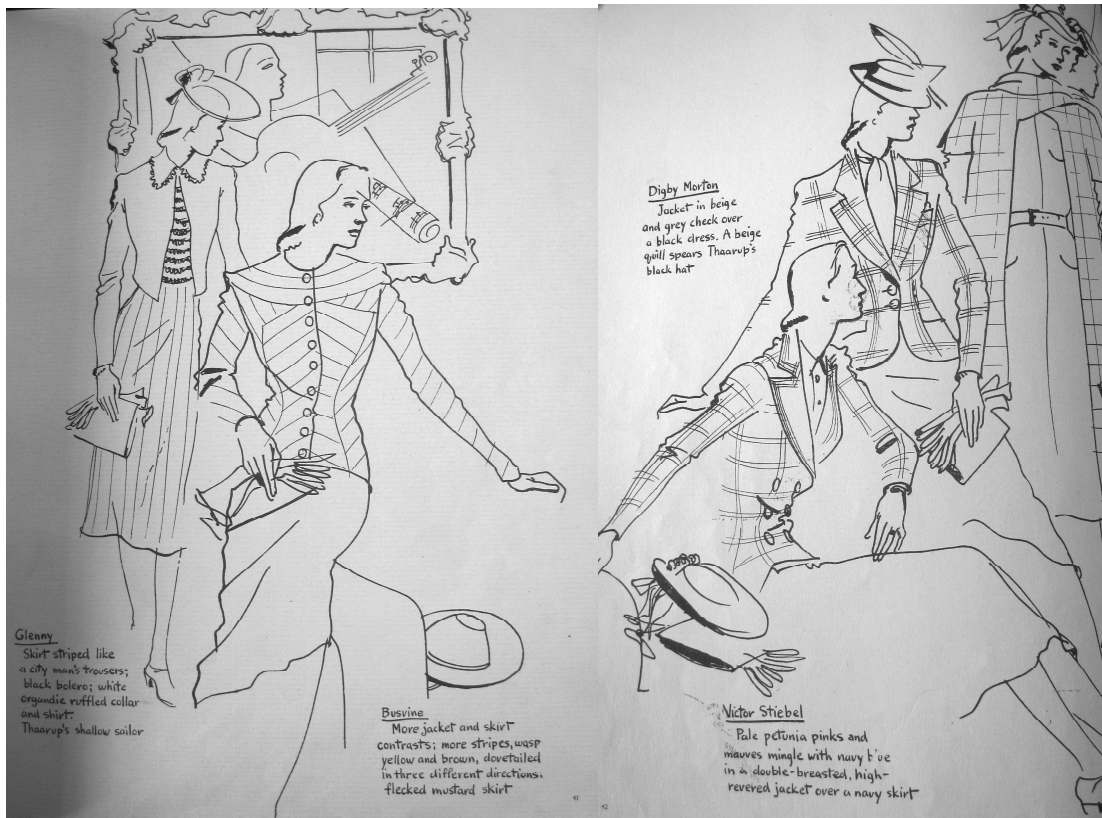
<sup>384</sup> Ibid.

<sup>385</sup> For an exploration of the manner in which fashion relies on both standardisation and novelty see for example, Joanne Finkelstein, *The Fashioned Self* (Cambridge Polity Press, 1991) p. 130





Figure 57: 'Blue Palm', a beach ensemble by Victor Stiebel in Celanese printed sharkskin with loose-fitting bolero top of white sharkskin worn beneath printed jacket. Included in the Fashion Group collection for foreign buyers in January 1938, *Women's Wear Daily*, 24 February 1938



Figures 58 - 60: Madge Garland 'Fashion Group Show 4 Pages – A Preview,' *Vogue*, 19 January 1938

and also demonstrate individuality through what Gilles Lipovetsky describes as the key characteristic of fashion stock: 'marginal differentiation'.<sup>386</sup> Many historians have pointed to this contradiction inherent within the complex codes of taste constructed around consumer goods within the capitalist system.<sup>387</sup> For example, the premise at the basis of Leora Auslander's consideration of taste professionals, who acted as intermediaries between consumers and distributors of goods, is that 'judgments of aesthetic value emerge from a complex interaction of desires for emulation, distinction and solidarity'.<sup>388</sup> In particular Auslander notes the irony, that in capitalist culture, which values and promotes individualism, taste is expected to comply with clear codes.<sup>389</sup> This idea is also fundamental to the sociologist, Georg Simmel's influential thesis that argues that the key characteristic of fashion in mass society is this perpetual tension between conformity and individuality.<sup>390</sup> To ensure that the London dressmakers could act as tastemakers for the American market, the key driver behind the chosen models was a careful balance between design synchronisation (in the form of the town and country suit) and originality (in the subtle detailing).

The Fashion Group's shows therefore used collaboration not to demonstrate the range of design available, but to a certain extent to monitor design heterogeneity. The power this coordinated narrative held over the British couture industry is made evident by Vogue's attitude towards Norman Hartnell who never participated in the joint shows and focused on soft dressmaking rather than hard tailored couture. For example, in 1937, when the Fashion Group's impulse towards collaboration and design

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<sup>386</sup> Gilles Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 1994) p. 131

<sup>387</sup> Useful texts on the social and political history of objects are Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Berkeley: Los Angeles: London, University of California Press, 1996), *The Social Life of Things*, edited by Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), William M. Reddy, *The Rise of Market Culture: The Textile Trade and French Society* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), Annie Phizacklea, *Unpacking the Fashion Industry: Gender, Racism and Class in Production* (London: Routledge, 1990), also helpful on taste are Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Wiley Blackman, 1990) and Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Routledge, 2010)

<sup>388</sup> Auslander, 1996, p. 3

<sup>389</sup> Auslander points out that women as the main consumers were expected to find 'the *juste milieu* between idiosyncrasy and conformity' Auslander, 1996, p.401 The paradox of the pressure on women to both adhere to fashion and yet be individual can also be seen in Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire: Design and Society Since 1750* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986) p.107

<sup>390</sup> Simmel takes this opposition and outlines two types of individualism. The first, which is equal to equality where people are free to dress like each other as they are freed from the constraints of social constructs and hierarchies. The second form which relates to modern life is where individuality is seen as being unique, and appearing different from others. Simmel posits these ideas of individuality as succeeding historical developments. Yet there is a cultural expectation to look individual, yet in practice how people choose to dress is often very similar. For further exploration of this idea see Sophie Woodward, *Why Women Wear What they Wear* (Oxford: New York: Berg, 2007) p.3,7,9,27-28,120,122,137

synchronisation was at its height it issued a rare and scathing review of his individual collection. Whilst it commended his competitors in the Fashion Group, it claimed his 'collection is something of a repetition. Hartnell continues his variations – on his own theme [...] colours are in sharp and rather obvious contrasts [...] many uninspired models.'<sup>391</sup> With the fashion industry intent on the pursuit of unifying trends, Hartnell may have been too big a name for British *Vogue* to ignore; yet his creative authority could be questioned. It is also telling that throughout 1939, when Hartnell's 'White Collection' for the Queen instigated a fashion for a 'Victorian' aesthetic, *Vogue* made no reference to his creative lead and every mention of corsets, bustles and white lace as key trends in soft dressmaking are linked to French couturiers.

For a limited time the Coronation may have offered a unique opportunity for the promotion and sale of a broad range of English fashions, particularly its more creative cocktail, dinner and evening dress. After this event, however, to create 'a powerful magnet for overseas buyers,' London couture was condensed into two main categories: 'matchless spectator sports suits and traditional tea gowns'.<sup>392</sup> This saw the Fashion Group present London as a complimentary rather than autonomous fashion centre, part of a tripartite system of fashion with Paris and New York. Within this system of representation, national identity played a key role and provided each fashion centre with a specific design narrative. This can be seen in the shift in Victor Stiebel's promotional rhetoric when, in 1937, he visited America as a representative of the British branch of the Fashion Group. To promote the July showcase he set out a clear division between English and French couture and contradicted his previous statements made three years earlier about the internationalism of fashion design (see *Chapter 1, p. 71*). He now claimed that:

The male point of view is all-important in England [...] and the English consequently excel in classic tailor-mades, in tweeds and country clothes. In Paris, on the other hand, it is the feminine viewpoint, which matters. Dressmakers, designers, manufacturers of materials, shoes accessories, all work together to give the French woman what she wants. They are all tremendously interested in clothes, and Paris undoubtedly is the fashion centre of the world.<sup>393</sup>

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<sup>391</sup> *Vogue: London Modes and Motors Edition*, 13 October 1937, p. 30

<sup>392</sup> Madge Garland, 'Fashion Group Show, - a preview', *Vogue*, 19 January 1938, p. 19

<sup>393</sup> 'Review of Mr. Victor Stiebel's lecture at the Women's Service Hall', *Nursery World*, April 1937 (VSPA/ADD/1994)

This gendered discourse constructed an imagined community of fashion with London the expert producers of 'hard' tailored sportswear in comparison to Paris' supremacy in 'soft' dressmaking.<sup>394</sup> This categorisation, in its appeal to the American market, was particularly astute. By the 1930s, as Rebecca Arnold has shown, sportswear was identified by the wider fashion industry as 'America's most distinctive form of dress' and London, the home of Savile Row, held a reputation as an authority in male tailoring.<sup>395</sup> Since the 1880s this had been appropriated into women's clothing, so that by the 1930s, the city's distinct 'power' in the production of female sportswear, in the form of the town and country suit, was 'well entrenched' both in Europe and America.<sup>396</sup>

'If there is one thing that Paris designers allow to British designers it is the lead in sportswear and tweeds,' intoned a journalist for the primarily male readership of *Referee Magazine* in 1936, 'this they say is because "we're a sporting nation" and now the strong movement towards tweedier styles in everyday dress (did anyone wear tweeds to town ten years ago?) is giving a big following to British fashion.'<sup>397</sup> The reference to the 'sporting nation,' was consistently reiterated in press reports of the London couturiers. This narrative drew on a prevalent component of British interwar cultural propaganda, which presented the country not as imperialistic and aggressive but as competitive and fair.<sup>398</sup> In addition, the idea of the 'sporting nation' was closely tied to the notional relationship between 'Englishness' and the countryside.<sup>399</sup> In the projection of England, this constructed an 'anti-urban bias' whereby the country rather than the city was its representational essence.<sup>400</sup> During the 1930s, the conception of a sporting, rural nation was appropriated by many of Britain's design industries particularly for international

<sup>394</sup> Here I draw on Benedict Anderson's concept of the 'imagined community' coined to discuss nationalism. The creation of imagined community was facilitated by the rise of 'print capitalism.' The concept is particularly pertinent to understand how separate nation's frame and re-imagine their identity. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 2006)

<sup>395</sup> Arnold, 2009, p.28, sportswear had three subcategories, those actually designed for sports such as tennis and golf, resort wear to both travel in and wear on holiday, and town and country wear - most specifically tweed suiting.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid.

<sup>397</sup> 'These Four Young Men Dictate Designs for Women,' *Referee Magazine*, London, March 1936 (VSPA/ADD/1994)

<sup>398</sup> The use of the phrase England is specific here. The vision of Britain presented within the projection of England was specifically that of the south of England. According to Osmond, 'Englishness and Britishness are fused. This fused identity is expressed as English at home and British abroad. John Osmond, *The Divided Kingdom* (London: Constable, 1988), p. 26

<sup>399</sup> An understanding exemplified by the prime minister Stanley Baldwin's assertion in 1926 that 'England is the country and the country is England,' Stanley Baldwin, *On England*, 1926 p. 2

<sup>400</sup> For further detail see Alun Hawkins, 'The discovery of rural England' in *Englishness: politics and culture 1880 – 1920*, edited by R. Colls and P. Dodd (London: Croom Helm, 1986) and Alex Potts, 'Constable country between the wars', in *Patriotism Vol. III*, edited by Raphael Samuel (London & New York: Routledge, 1989) p. 168

exhibitions.<sup>401</sup> For example, sporting goods and the English countryside provided the main focus for the British pavilion at the Paris exhibition between April and October 1937. This projection of England as Alexandra Harris points out was one of 'fishing, tennis and weekend cottages [... which] took visitors far from Parisian urbanity into a country of sheep and cathedrals'.<sup>402</sup> The whimsy of the pavilion caused Kingsley Martin (the editor of *The New Statesman*) to famously claim that it was the depiction of 'a nice England, unlike any that had existed or could exist; England as seen by guests in a country house party where the servants were unobtrusively in the background, where all nature smiled and every luxury appeared as if by magic'.<sup>403</sup> This was a representation often evoked in the promotion of London couture. The adverts for the Fashion Group member Winifred Mawdsley, for instance, consistently highlighted its designer Lady Earle's ability to translate the sports clothes of the British landed gentry and the 'racing set' into contemporary town and country wear for her clients (Figure 61). Interestingly, when the Fashion Group was given responsibility for the Paris exhibition's dress display, Lady Earle was one of the three designers chosen to coordinate the selection process.<sup>404</sup> The resultant display saw the London dressmakers' field of design separated into two 'typically English scenes': racing and the country house.<sup>405</sup> This adhered to the Council for Art and Industry's stipulation to the Fashion Group contributors to 'concentrate on those things at which we know we are good – don't try to beat Paris at her own specialties, [... focus on clothes] for country life, sports, children, weekending and of course men'.<sup>406</sup> The Fashion Group's selection process for both the Paris exhibition and the couture showcase created a clear identity for London fashion. This narrative therefore drew on three key elements, not only the country's acknowledged pre-eminence in tailoring and its recognition as a 'sporting nation' but most importantly the lifestyle of its landed gentry.

<sup>401</sup> For a consideration of how these ideas were utilised particularly in the British ceramic and furniture industry see Buckley, 2007, p.67 - 68

<sup>402</sup> Harris, 2010, p.47

<sup>403</sup> Kingsley Martin, *A Second Volume of Autobiography 1931 – 45* (Hutchinson of London, 1968) p. 209, the British Pavilion was in stark contrast to many of the other nationally aggressive projections. This exhibition is most noted for the dynamic portrayals of nation state presented by Germany and Soviet Pavilions. Where opposite each other on the Place du Trocadero faced the German Eagle and two colossal figures of a Soviet young man and woman.

<sup>404</sup> The dress sub-committee for the UK Pavilion at the Paris International Exhibition of 1937 were: Lady Chamberlain (Chairman) Samuel Courtauld, Frank Farrell, James Laver, Thow Munro, Joyce Reynolds, Henry Rogers, Alison Settle and the designers Margaret Harris (Motley), Lady Earle (Winifred Mawdsley Ltd.) and Victor Stiebel. (ASA/GB/NNAF/P44076)

<sup>405</sup> In the *Racing Scene* Digby Morton, Jaeger, Leathercraft, Aquascutum and Rose & Blairman provided the garments and in the *Country House Scene* by Winifred Mawdsley (Lady Earle) Victor Stiebel, Motley, Mary Manners Ltd., Peter Russell and Fortnum and Mason.

<sup>406</sup> Fashion Group Bulletin, 1937 (ASA/GB/NNAF/P44076)



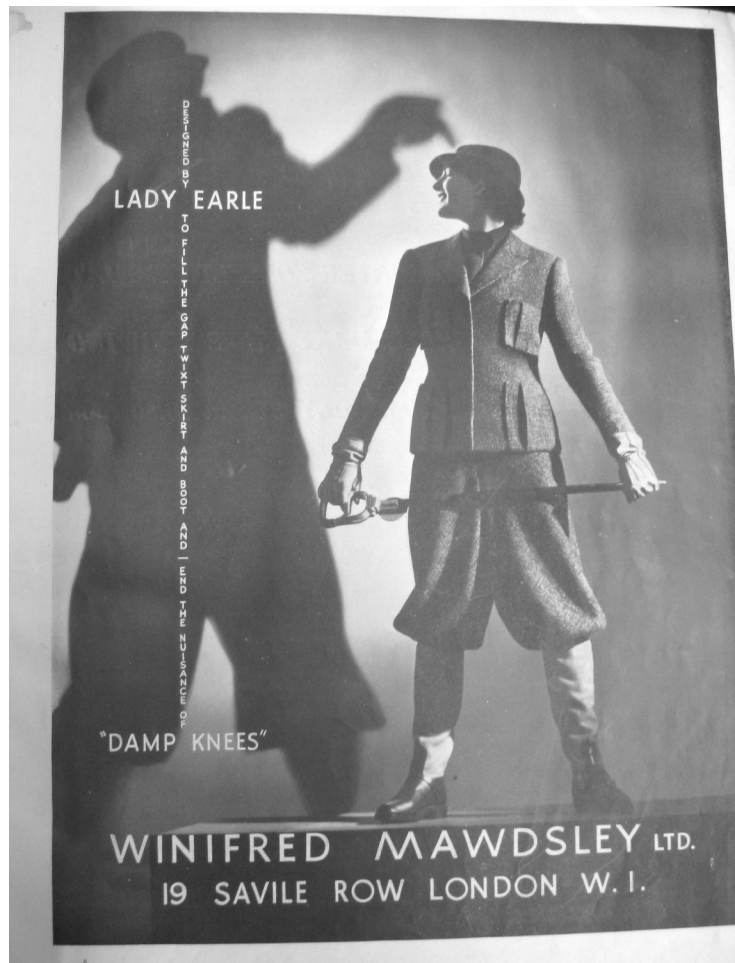


Figure 61: Winifred Mawdsley Ltd. (19 Saville Row) Adverts.  
(Top) *Vogue*, 13 May 1937  
(Bottom) *Vogue*, 13 November 1935

The traditional dress culture of the aristocratic Englishwoman, who moved between her country estate and the London Season, ensured that particularly in America, British sportswear was seen through a 'prism of class, taste and status'.<sup>407</sup> However, this promotional narrative, had to overcome a prominent cultural stereotype: that the archetypal Englishwoman dressed for comfort rather than luxury, and had no time for fashion. 'When compared to the Frenchwoman's innate dress sense,' as one American journalist put it in 1932, it was necessary 'to teach the Englishwoman how to dress so as not to resemble a rare old piece of early Woolworth'.<sup>408</sup> In the same year, a British *Vogue* article, 'As They Wear It' (Figure 62) provides a visual demonstration of the perceived difference in the dress culture of the French and English elites at the start of the decade. The article suggested its readers 'cast an eye' on the French Comtesse's Lanvin and Vionnet outfits, then 'take in Lady Wimborne's suit, with the neat and quite gaudy checks [...] The Countess of Oxford and Asquith, clad in her own style and superbly oblivious to revolutions in fashions.'<sup>409</sup> The tailored daywear of the French comtesses in an urban setting was contrasted with their British counterparts in the mud of the sporting and agricultural countryside. It made clear that the French, with their plain fabrics, tailored fitted waists, fur trims and high heels, had their couturiers for guidance, whilst 'the Britishers,' with their practical footwear and androgynous poses, drew on the styles of the previous decade and were depicted as devoid of fashion sense.

The commercial drive to embrace the sportswear of the aristocratic country tradition could therefore well have produced an aesthetic that was anti-modern, and against the notion of fashion. However, as the curator Edwina Ehrman has pointed out, under the direction of London couturiers, tailoring 'became more sensitive to fashion change'.<sup>410</sup> This had an impact on the mediated representation of the Englishwoman. When Digby Morton set up his eponymous business in 1933, for example, an American syndicated press report announced, 'the old-plodding, tweed-matching, square-toed, sensible shoes image is being swept aside by the fashions of newer English Designers, rapidly making themselves felt as world leaders who are motivating fashion to think

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<sup>407</sup> For the development of women's tailoring see Taylor, L., 'The Wardrobe of Mrs Leonard Messel' in Breward, C. et al., 2002, p.118. For the impact of the English suit in the interwar American market see Arnold, 2009, p. 27 – 29. The understanding of British clothing, particularly abroad, was often defined by the landed gentry's division of activity between town and country -this social elite traditionally spent half the year on their country estates, with all the specifications and responsibilities that entailed, then came to London to take part in the social Season

<sup>408</sup> Ann Archer, 'British threaten French Corner on Style Rule', *United Press Red Letter*, New York, 6 October 1932 (VSPA/ADD/1994)

<sup>409</sup> 'As They Wear It – The French – The Britishers,' *Vogue*, January 1932, p.40 - 41

<sup>410</sup> Ehrman, 2005, p.107





tailored instead of mannish'.<sup>411</sup> Morton's customers belonged mostly to the 'gay rich racing set,' who wore his suits all day. His couture collections, which contained no dressmaking, were an innovation for London as they were restricted to town and country sportswear predominately in tweed; 'so fashionable that they could be worn with confidence at the Ritz.'<sup>412</sup> Morton's style of urban, sophisticated town and country wear is illustrated in his early adverts. As Figures 63 and 64 make clear his tailoring was soft rather than masculine; given distinction by its fabric and the intricate construction of details such as a rosette or pleated front panel; with topcoats with their lapels matched to the suit or edged with fur. His mannequins were presented as leisured inhabitants of the city; a daily walk in the park was their sporting activity.

In order to construct an appropriate role model for contemporary fashion, as London couturiers began to specialise in these 'dressier tweeds', fashion magazines and newspaper columns began to alter the depiction of the Englishwoman's dress sense. This is made clear in a fashion illustration for *Queen* magazine in 1938. (Figure 65) Based on one of the photographs taken for the aforementioned *Vogue* article 'How they wear it,' the illustrator replaced the English woman's shapeless cloche hat and rugged tweeds with millinery by Thaarup and town and country suit by Morton. The image suggested a continuation of an aristocratic dress culture, yet, when the reality of the original photograph is compared to the artist's rendering, it supports Herbert Blumer's assertion that for the fashion industry, 'it is not the prestige of the elite which makes the design fashionable but, instead, it is the suitability or potential fashionableness of the design which allows the prestige of the elite to be attached to it'.<sup>413</sup> The country tweeds of the landed gentry, originally intended for hunting and shooting parties, presented a plausible integrity and made English tweeds-for-town emblematic of a modern active lifestyle. By the time they became the mainstay of the Fashion Group's collaborative collection, the London couturiers' tweed suits may have drawn on the traditions of the landed gentry, which imbued them with connotations of taste and class, but they had replaced traditional rugged sportswear with softly tailored fashionable garments. In so doing, the promotional narrative that fashion magazines and the Fashion Group constructed around London sportswear, supports Blumer's contention that fashion did

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<sup>411</sup> 'Daylong Frocks seen as style emancipator', *United Press*, 26 February 1933 (VSPA/ADD/1994)

<sup>412</sup> Amies, 1954, p.38

<sup>413</sup> Blumer, 1968, p. 278



Figure 63: Digby Morton Advert c. 1933

SEPTEMBER 18, 1935

5

AUTUMN  
COLLECTION  
WILL BE  
SHOWN ON  
SEPTEMBER  
THE 26th

**DIGBY  
MORTON**  
LTD.

PALACE GATE, W.8 West 0704

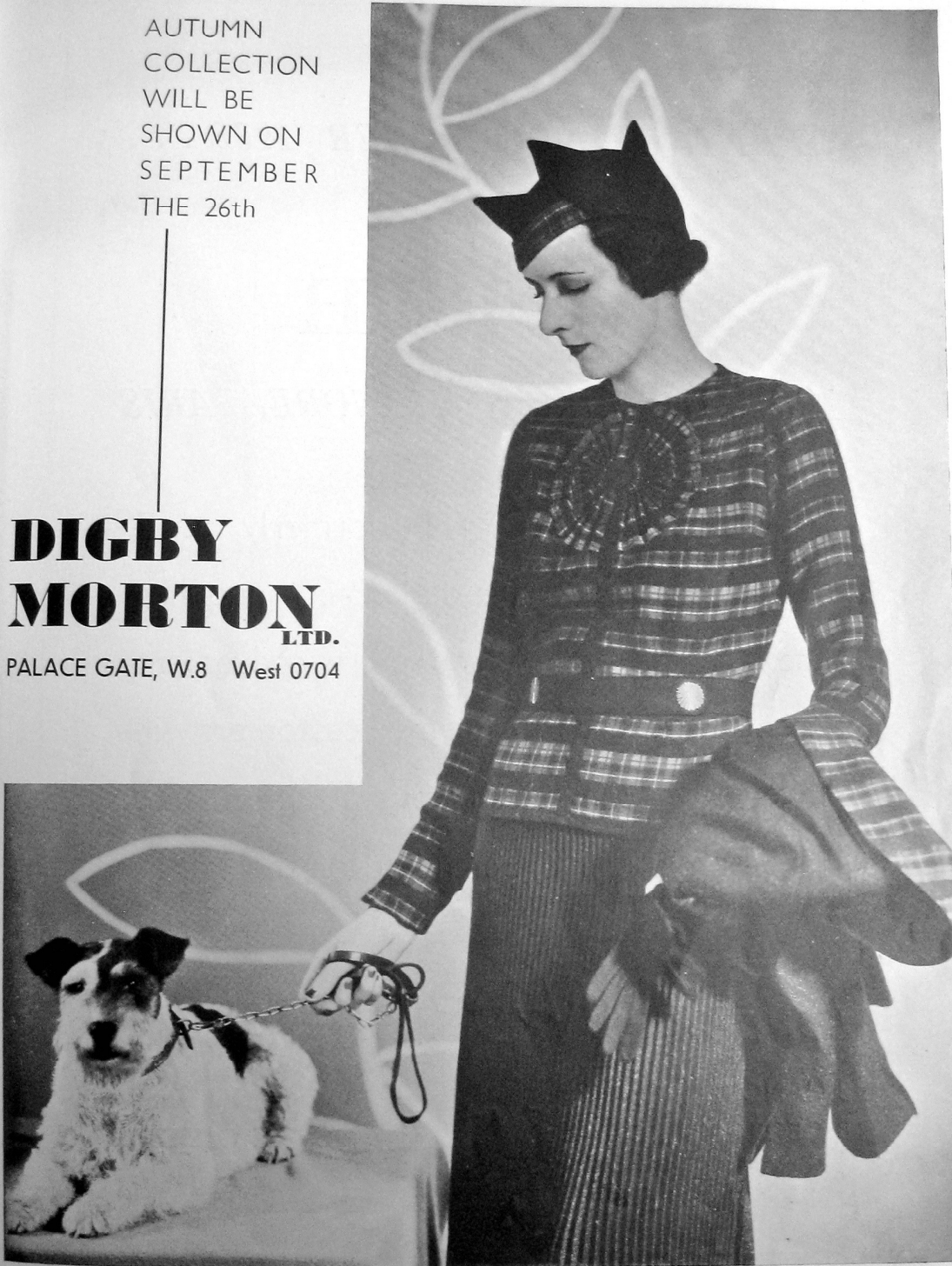


Figure 64: Digby Morton Advert, *Vogue*, 24 July 1935



Figure 65: *Queen Magazine*, 1938. Muriel Deans Fashion Illustration, based on the image of Susan Montague from 'How they Wear It,' *Vogue* 1932

not 'stem from the prestige of the elite, rather it transcended and embraced this prestige'.<sup>414</sup>

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In 1940, the American actress Mildred Shay commissioned an outfit from Hardy Amies and requested a garment that would be unmistakably British. The tweeds-for-town suit she received, which comprised a perfectly tailored single-breasted jacket with a straight, kick-pleated skirt, fulfilled this specification. The shape and cut of the suit conformed to the expectations of English tailoring, while the jacket lapel provided its novelty. Rather than discarding the selvage edge of the Linton tweed cloth, Amies had retained it as a design feature (Figure 66). In so doing, the fact that the garment was 'made in England' was made explicit. Whilst Shay wore this suit in support of her English husband's country at a time of conflict, its confident design represented the authority London had gained as a transatlantic destination for the consumption of tailored sportswear. This chapter has shown that from the mid-1930s the network of fashion intermediaries and the abbreviated narrative of couture production cultivated by the Fashion Group of Great Britain had played a major role within this confidence and ensured that London as a fashion centre was defined as the international destination for tailored couture. For the London dressmakers, this design consensus created unity but was also a recurrent point of tension. By July 1938, for example, press reports indicate a level of uncertainty towards the boundaries being constructed around English couture, by designers such as Champcommunal, Hartnell, Russell and Motley who were recorded as anxious to emphasise that their skill did 'not begin and end' with the production of tweed suits.<sup>415</sup> This saw these designers begin to distance themselves from the Fashion Group and refuse to participate in its collaborative showcase.

From 1936 until the outbreak of war, membership of the British branch of the Fashion Group saw the London couturiers become part of a transatlantic network that validated their professional position and offers one of the clearest explanations for why 1936 was the tipping point in London's recognition as a fashion centre. Yet as this consideration of the Fashion Group's objectives and activity has demonstrated, whilst it

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<sup>414</sup> Ibid.

<sup>415</sup> 'One Design Each At Fashion Group Party,' *Draper's Record*, 16 July 1938 (VSPA/ADD/1994)





Figure 66: (Top) The actress Mildred Shay in suit designed by Hardy Amies in 1940 alongside fellow actors John Garfield, Geoffrey Steele and Geraldine Fitzgerald in the Hollywood Canteen July 1944  
(Bottom) Detail of Mildred Shay's suit in the Hardy Amies Archive, 2010

created a supportive network and promotional platform for the London couture industry, it ultimately used this collaboration to construct a unified design narrative that addressed the needs of the American market and thereby manipulated the nature of the elite dressmakers' design process.

The philosophy behind the Fashion Group of Great Britain opened up a different way of viewing the elite dressing of a select consumer group as it positioned fashion and styling and in particular the London couturier as key to a national strategy for design. Yet, as Jonathan Woodham has pointed out in relation to the increased interest in the designer and design reform, design historians have often been misled by the amount of activity in the interwar period into a belief that there was a true sea change of attitude towards the designer in industry. In this context, whilst the Fashion Group may have positioned the couturiers as the key agents of change and innovation for the industrial marketplace, it was not really their creative design autonomy, but their compliance in the authentication of mass fashion that was invaluable. Original designers were needed to prove London a creative fashion centre, yet ironically, the fashion industry needed to control uniqueness and individuality and designer collaboration and unity was the most important element in this process.

The couturiers' growing awareness and antipathy towards this manipulation of their practice was made apparent in July 1938, when they all refused to participate in any more of the Fashion Group's collaborative dress shows. Instead, the Group held a more exclusive 'party,' at the Mirabel on Curzon Street, for which only ten houses (Busvine, Lachasse, Leathercraft, Digby Morton, Lydia Moss, Guy Olliver, Rahvis, Victor Stiebel, Rose Taylor and Teddy Tinling) provided one mannequin to mingle amongst the guests dressed in eveningwear from their latest collections, whilst the designers gave out invitations to their individual shows to suitable professionals. There is no specific documentation of why the designers stopped participating in the full collaborative showcase. However, the fact that the Fashion Group had recently been extended to include Associate Members from British wholesale and retail houses, could provide an explanation. This is made obvious in Margaret Havinden's assertion in the Fashion Group's magazine that these Associate Members would now help to 'filter the success of English couturiers to a broad range of British manufacture'.<sup>416</sup> The lack of designer-cooperation with the joint showcase can therefore be seen as both a rejection of the

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<sup>416</sup> Margaret Havinden, 'Greetings to our Associate Members' *Fashion Group Circular*, May 1939 (HAA)

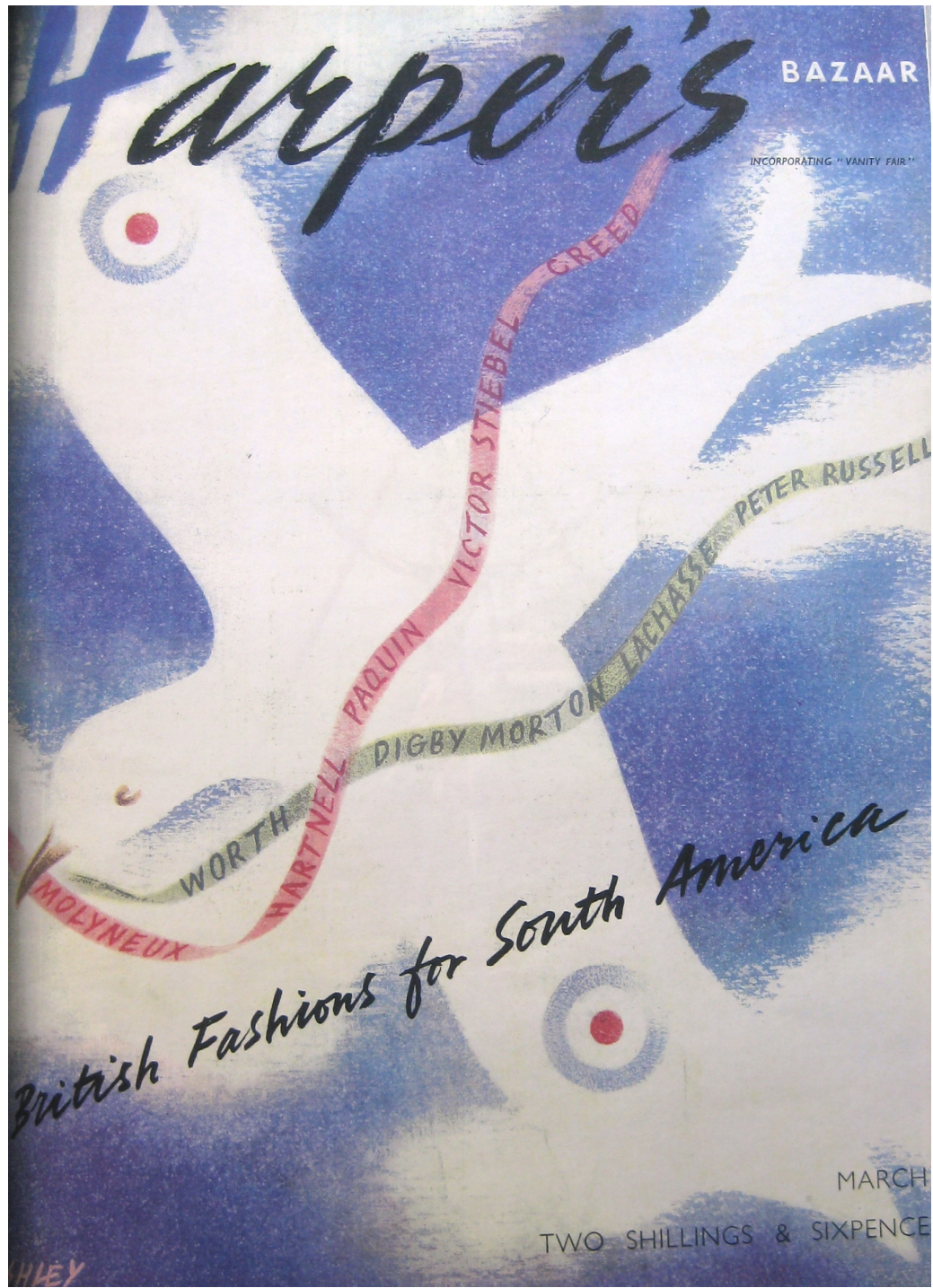


Fashion Group's narrative it had constructed around English couture for foreign buyers and its design reform agenda for the fashion industry overall.

The ethos expressed in the Fashion Group's overriding aims had always had more in common with the commercial development of the mass market than its couturier-members would have been happy to admit. Participation in the collaborative export shows for foreign buyers and compliance with the needs of the distant American market had been a profitable form of marketing. However, the Fashion Group's aspiration, to use the creativity and prestige of the emergent couturiers for the benefit of the wider British fashion industry, contradicted the dressmakers' subjective reasons for joining the Group. In Britain, these practitioners had rejected the lucrative mass market in order to establish businesses that were based on hand rather than industrial production, on creative rather than purely commercial objectives. This, as Chapter 1 demonstrated, privileged a form of non-economic capital based on creativity, exclusivity, social value and ultimately reputation. This cultural capital was hard fought for and needed careful protection. The acceptance of Associate Members however presupposed that the couturiers would share their designs, without remuneration, for reproduction by mass-market providers. This was a development that would have undermined their creative autonomy, interfered with their fragile reputations and ultimately their future economic gain.

In 1938, the couturiers may have rejected the idea of collaboration, particularly as a way to raise the standards of design in the broader British fashion industry and yet during the Second World War they not only set up the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers but also played a major role within the government's Utility Scheme through the provision of design prototypes for the British fashion industry. Even though the London couturiers had collaborated within the Fashion Group of Great Britain in the 1930s, it can be argued that without the war further designer collectivism would never have happened. This is perhaps supported by the fact that the Incorporated Society was not created until over two years into the conflict. The next chapter is therefore concerned with an exploration of how the Society finally came together and how for the couturiers collaboration became more than merely a promotional activity. It will also show how the war allowed the aspirations of the Fashion Group to continue when they may otherwise have been rejected whilst it ultimately argues that these aspirations were fundamental to the continuation of this form of luxury production at a time of egalitarianism and restraint.

**'Brisk Action on the Mayfair Front'**  
**The War Years and the Creation of the Incorporated Society of London**  
**Fashion Designers**



The cover of the March 1941 edition of *Harper's Bazaar* featured a zoomorphic white RAF warplane that merged into a dove of peace. In place of an olive branch, the dove carried two ribbons emblazoned with the names of Molyneux, Hartnell, Paquin, Victor Stiebel, Creed, Worth, Digby Morton, Lachasse and Peter Russell. This issue was dedicated to the fashion and fabric exhibition that was touring South America as part of the 'Britain Delivers the Goods' export campaign to this lucrative foreign market. The collection brought together the British textile industry and nine London-based couturiers to create the first fashion exhibition ever financed directly by the British government. With Britain at war, the auspicious symbolism of this patriotic cover suggests that the war had altered the national, economic and political significance of the London couturiers.

In 1942, the designers who participated in this exhibition went on to create the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers with its wartime aims to protect the London couture houses and ensure that the prestige of all levels of the British fashion and textile industry was maintained. The examination of the Fashion Group of Great Britain in the 1930s has shown the importance of collaboration within a vibrant commercial market. This chapter now moves to consider how the role of designer-collaboration altered in response to a wartime economy when fashion became a seemingly irrelevant luxury. By 1938, the couturiers may have begun to reject the objectives of the Fashion Group of Great Britain, yet war acted as the catalyst for the creation of an official couture trade association. This chapter will therefore examine the exact sequence of events that led to the creation of the Incorporated Society. It will explore to what extent collaboration enabled the London couturiers to solidify their position, increase their national standing and sustain their businesses throughout the unstable period of total war. Couture represented an elite class-based practice of clothing production, its maintenance at a time when luxury was condemned and production restricted to the needs of the war effort therefore offers an interesting example of how the specific processes and narratives of design practice can change in relation to particular social and political agendas. The overriding concerns of this chapter are therefore to explore how these small-scale luxury goods businesses, throughout this period of overriding egalitarianism and restraint, were maintained and how the Incorporated Society was formed in relation to its wartime context.

Within the historiography of London couture there is an understanding that 'during the war the government backed the [Incorporated] Society from the outset,

recognising its export potential and the organisational advantage of working with a single group.<sup>417</sup> To a certain extent this assertion may be true, however as empirical analysis will show, governmental backing was not as immediate, or sustained as this interpretation would suggest. For the first year of the war, English couture production was recognised only as a private and self-serving enterprise and the British government saw little reason to support its continuation. For example, at the beginning of 1940, despite an appeal to the Department of Overseas Trade for funding, the British branch of the Fashion Group came to an abrupt end.<sup>418</sup> In an interview with Mass Observation the Group's 'Chairman' Margaret Havinden referred to her correspondence with this department and claimed that the British authorities perceived no apparent wartime role for either the Group or the couturiers and that with the onset of war, the government's only suggestion for the Fashion Group was that it should become a charitable 'offshoot of the British Council'. In turn this insinuated that the couturiers' only contribution to the war effort might be in terms of cultural propaganda rather than any intrinsic value to industry.<sup>419</sup>

This dismissive attitude towards the designers began to change in the second half of 1940. June of that year saw France fall and, with the Nazi occupation of Paris, the international fashion industry severed from its principal creative source. By September, British *Vogue* announced that with Paris in 'eclipse' it was now 'London's opportunity to shine'.<sup>420</sup> It went so far as to compare the situation of the current war with the French Revolution, which it claimed gave 'London a permanent pre-eminence in men's tailoring' and suggested that 'maybe, now, a similar cause will have a similar effect; creating a situation in which London has a chance of taking the lion's share of the World's fashion trade'.<sup>421</sup> The Board of Trade's financial and promotional support for the 1941 South American showcase demonstrates that the possibility for London to become the world's fashion centre, and consequently its designers a significant source of export revenue, had swiftly moved from the editorials of fashion magazines and the aspirations of the Fashion Group of Great Britain into official government discourse.

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<sup>417</sup> Ehrman, 2004, p.106

<sup>418</sup> Margaret Havinden, MOI, 27 February 1940 (TC 18 – Box 2)

<sup>419</sup> Ibid. As discussed in Chapter 1 the British Council is a charitable organization formed in 1934 focused on forming International cultural and educational relationships for the promulgation of British culture for reasons of trade and peace.

<sup>420</sup> 'London Delivers the Goods,' *Vogue*, September 1940, p.27

<sup>421</sup> Ibid.

Despite both the unprecedented opportunity created by the removal of French competition and political support for export promotion, the London couturiers did not immediately band together to form the Incorporated Society. The continuation of rivalry and hesitance towards designer collaboration are made clear in a letter, from 1941, recounted in the autobiography of Edna Woolman Chase (the Editor of *American Vogue*):

On the heels of the [south American] exhibition came a wail from our harassed Harry [Yoxall, the business manager of *British Vogue*]; "I am trying to assist as a kind of mid-husband at the birth of an Incorporated Society of British Dress Designers but it is a pretty hard delivery, as all the limbs, so to speak, are kicking in different directions. But I feel that the couture boys and girls here will never get anywhere unless they form some kind of professional association and maintain as a permanent policy the temporary unity which was rather precariously achieved for the South American Collection [...] I gave a cocktail party last week to a group of the best London houses, the French refugees and the leading resident American buying agents. Cocktail parties sound rather thriftless for these days but just because there are so few this one seemed better than it probably was, and we hear on all sides that it was a great popular success. [...] You know enough of the jealousy of the London fashion trade to realise what it means when I say that Hartnell, Stiebel, Digby Morton and Miss Campbell of Lachasse were fraternizing like buddies round the bar."<sup>422</sup>

The move towards wartime collaboration was therefore neither spontaneous nor smooth, but as this chapter will show, a cohesive designer network became imperative to navigate the government's policies brought in to mobilise resources for the war effort.<sup>423</sup> For example, Norman Hartnell in retrospect, pointed out that he had many 'misgivings' in working with his fellow couturiers and for him collaboration was a result of 'the urge of war-time conditions' to present a 'common front' to the Board of Trade.<sup>424</sup> This chapter will explore the nature of these 'war time conditions' and question the achievements of this collaborative 'common front' within the political climate of the first half of the 1940s.

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<sup>422</sup> Woolman-Chase, 1954, p.332

<sup>423</sup> British victory depended on the scale of resources that could be mobilised for the war effort. At the peak of the war over half of national expenditure was devoted to the war, with the working populace divided equally between the armed forces, the munitions industry and those industries essential to the war effort and then finally to less essential industries of which the production of luxury clothing was a part. For full information of the government's mobilisation of resources see Stephen Broadberry and Peter Howlett, 'Blood, Sweat and Tears: British Mobilisation for World War II' in *A World at Total War: Global Conflict and the Politics of Destruction, 1939 – 45* edited by Roger Chickering and Stig Forster (Washington: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 157-176

<sup>424</sup> Hartnell, 1955, p.106

In the recollections of both Woolman-Chase and Hartnell of the Incorporated Society's formation, any trace of the previous activity of the Fashion Group of Great Britain is overlooked as they both assert that this wartime collaboration was unprecedented. This oversight has also been included in all retrospective accounts of the Incorporated Society's inception, yet it must be acknowledged that the Society, with Yoxall as its instigator and Havinden as its first chairman, built on this previously established network.<sup>425</sup> Although it drew on designers from within the Fashion Group, the Incorporated Society only included six of its seventeen dress committee members. This was not because these were the only designers who continued production throughout the war; Rahvis and Strassner, for example, also remained open however they were not brought into this self-defined group. No documentation of the process of deciding membership for the Incorporated Society survives, so it is difficult to address how this network was formed or how those not involved felt about its inception. The six members from the Fashion Group were Stiebel, Russell, Morton and Amies, who had all participated in the collaborative showings to foreign buyers, and Hartnell and Champcommunal of Worth, who had not. The transfer of the British designers Edward Molyneux and Charles Creed from Paris, and the Italian Bianca Mosca former designer at Schiaparelli (Paris) and Paquin (London) then increased the Society's number to nine.

This chapter, after a consideration of the couturiers' initial reaction to the war, focuses on specific examples of wartime collaboration and its formalisation within the Incorporated Society to explore whether the antecedent objectives of the Fashion Group, which aimed to utilise the couturiers to develop London's position as a fashion centre and offer design leadership for the nation's fashion and textile industry, continued throughout the war.<sup>426</sup> In so doing, this chapter maps the transition of the design reform objectives of the Fashion Group in the 1930s into the wartime Incorporated Society to highlight aspects of continuation, consolidation and transformation within the couturiers' collaboration.

### **3:1) 'Fashion Marches On': The adaptation of couture production to the conditions of war**

To understand why the couturiers did not immediately group themselves into the Incorporated Society at the start of the war it is important to consider the changes that

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<sup>425</sup> See for example Breward (2004), Taylor (1989), Ehrman (2004), De la Haye (1998)

<sup>426</sup> These aspirations, as set out in Chapter 2, were to utilise the couturiers to develop London's position as a fashion centre and offer design leadership for the nation's fashion and textile industry.

affected their business environment and design practice during the first two years of the conflict. With the declaration of war in September 1939, the British government immediately implemented policies to help the war effort and to prepare for intensive mainland bombing. In London this resulted in air raid precautions and evacuation. These policies, alongside the bombing fears associated with the capital city and the immediate rationing of petrol, made it less attractive and more difficult for customers to come to the West End for the fittings required for made-to-measure clothing.<sup>427</sup> Between December 1939 and April 1940, Mass Observation (which from 1936 until the mid-60s conducted social surveys) held a series of interviews with representatives from the British fashion industry. This has left a particularly relevant source that provides evidence of the war's instant and understandable effect on the couturiers' businesses and working lives.<sup>428</sup> For example, in the interviews couturiers such as Stiebel and Morton claimed that they had witnessed a noticeable fall in demand as their clients restricted visits to central London even in the early months of the war.<sup>429</sup> The December 1939 issue of *Vogue* verifies this claim and notes the designers' response to these changes, with many now 'taking the West End to the country [...] sending sketches and material swatches to their out-of-town clients and restricting fittings to a minimum'.<sup>430</sup> Under the heading 'Brisk Action on the Mayfair Front', it even highlighted a range of new business strategies that allowed clients to avoid fittings altogether; such as Morton's off-the-peg department that specialised in colour-coordinated jerseys and skirts and Isobel's mail-order service where made-to-measure dresses were constructed with their fit based on a garment, that the client posted to London, from her existing wardrobe.<sup>431</sup>

Documentation of the last activity undertaken under the banner of the Fashion Group of Great Britain shows that its response to the drop in London clients was a travelling mannequin parade with clothes by Stiebel and Morton, hats by Aage Thaarup, furs by Louis Wolff, and cosmetics by Elizabeth Arden. In November 1939, this toured large hotels in Liverpool, Manchester, Cheltenham and Bristol. The sixteen shows

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<sup>427</sup> A tailored suit could require anything up to five fittings, although a house such as Lachasse had already, by the late Thirties, taken its fittings to as little as two to cater to its many out-of-town clients of the 'racing set'. For further information see, 'Much too expensive for me: A Sisterly Essay for Frightened People', *Eve's Journal*, January 1939, pp. 86 – 88 (87)

<sup>428</sup> 'Personal Appearance and Clothes: Correspondence and Interviews' 1939-40 / Interviews with people in fashion retail December 1939-April 1940' Conducted by Thomas Harrison (Mass observation Archive, University of Sussex, TC18/2/A)

<sup>429</sup> Margaret Havinden (in her capacity as Chairman of the Fashion Group of Great Britain), MOI, 27 February 1940

<sup>430</sup> 'Brisk Action on the Mayfair Front,' *Vogue*, November 1939, pp. 26 - 27

<sup>431</sup> Ibid.

presented were reported to be particularly well attended by approximately nine hundred and fifty women, which as the Secretary of the Fashion Group pointed out to Mass Observation, ensured a 'greater recognition for these designers throughout England.'<sup>432</sup> The benefits from this showcase were not only promotional but also specifically commercial as the designers each took an unprecedented step and sent their best saleswomen and fitters to garner new customers and prepare orders. At a later date their staff then returned to undertake one fitting, before the garments were finished back in the London workrooms and forwarded to each client.<sup>433</sup> This was the first time London couture had been either displayed or fitted outside of the capital in England. This collaboration demonstrates the extension, not only of the Fashion Group's promotional strategies initiated for foreign buyers, but also the couturiers' production process to the wartime needs of its provincial clients.

The operations of many couture houses, alongside adjustments to their customers' changed requirements, were also disrupted and altered by the war duties taken on by a number of the designers. Unlike the First World War, the conscription of men between the ages of twenty and thirty-three was immediately implemented, and the government also announced that all men between the ages of eighteen and forty-one not in 'reserved occupations' could also be called up.<sup>434</sup> With fashion design unprotected as an important wartime occupation, Digby Morton volunteered to become an air raid warden and Stiebel a river policeman who was then moved to the Ministry of Supply's camouflage unit.<sup>435</sup> Hartnell joined the Home Guard.<sup>436</sup> Amies and Creed began fire brigade duties. The former, due to his fluency in French and German, was swiftly commissioned into the newly formed Special Operations Executive and was by the end of the war, 'head of sabotage in Belgium.'<sup>437</sup> The latter, after his conscription was twice

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<sup>432</sup> Jean Smith (Secretary of the Fashion Group of Great Britain), MOI, 29 November 1939 (MO/TC 18-Box 2). Also reported in 'Travelling Dress Show' *Birmingham Mail*, 4 December 1939 (VSPA/ADD/1994)

<sup>433</sup> 'London Dressmakers Plan Provincial Selling Tour', *Women's Wear Daily*, 19 October 1939 (DMPB)

<sup>434</sup> Broadberry and Howlett, 2002, pp. 157-176

<sup>435</sup> 'Gossip on Fashion Dictators', *The Northern Whig*, Belfast, 21 November 1952. For further information of Stiebel's war activity see Shephard, 2010, p. 233

<sup>436</sup> Interview with Brenda Naylor, (Hartnell employee) 13 February 2012

<sup>437</sup> P. Day, 'How Secret Agent Hardy stayed in Vogue during the War', *The Telegraph*, 29 April 2003. For Amies' description of his war activity see Hardy Amies, 1954, pp. 72 – 78. For the covert nature of Amies' war-time role also see David Lister, 'Queen's Tailor Hardy Amies was a Wartime Hitman,' *The Independent*, 24 August 2000 and *Episode II - Secret War: Hardy Amies and Operation Ratweek*, Directed by Martin J.O. Hughes, Acorn Media, 19 April 2011





Figure 68: 'This Was His Busman's Holiday' *Daily Sketch*, 12 January 1940, p. 11



Figure 69: Victor Stiebel at Jacqmar Press Photograph, c. 1941

'referred' because of his export work, was finally drafted into the Royal Artillery in 1943.<sup>438</sup> In terms of public relations, this engagement in the war effort ensured that the couturiers demonstrated not only their patriotism but also their machismo. Wartime press reports of their design activities, particularly in the case of the bachelors Amies and Stiebel, always utilised the designation 'private' or later 'captain,' and were often accompanied by images of them in uniform. (Figure 68 & Figure 69) It could therefore be argued that many of these male fashion designers, despite Morton and Creed being married, actively promoted their war work so as not to risk both personal and business association with the 'sexually suspect shirkers' ridiculed in the popular press.<sup>439</sup>

These wartime occupations did not however stop their operation as designers. For example, Morton kept his house open throughout the duration of the war, however financial difficulties saw Stiebel forced to liquidate his business and move his staff and operation to the textile house of Jacqmar.<sup>440</sup> Amies was unable to continue employment at Lachasse, but he took up an unprecedented opportunity to continue to work as a couturier under his own name in the London branch of Worth. The wartime environment also allowed Charles Creed to relocate from Paris and operate, without detriment to his prestige, from the made-to-measure department of the Knightsbridge store Fortnum and Mason. This move away from autonomous business activity allowed these couturiers to negotiate their restricted participation in the fashion industry and alleviate prohibitive production costs and staff shortages.<sup>441</sup> The engagement in war work therefore bolstered the dressmakers' public image and also began a process of reciprocity, in which they worked with and received support from other dress houses and retailers.

War did not stop the production of couture or its consumption, as the dressmakers' clients continued to have the aspirations and funds to purchase new clothes. The conflict did however instigate a marked change of attitude towards both personal appearance and the style of fashionable dress. The aforementioned Mass Observation interviews reveal the changed consumer attitudes confronted by fashion producers and retailers. Throughout the interviews many industry representatives voiced their dismay at what they saw as the careless attitude to appearance that immediately

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<sup>438</sup> Charles Creed, *Maid to Measure*, (London: Jarrolds, 1961) p. 132

<sup>439</sup> For a detailed analysis of this gendered attack see Sonia Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain 1939 – 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 'Chapter Five: Temperate Heroes: Masculinity on the Home Front,' pp. 151 – 196

<sup>440</sup> Victor Stiebel, 'Company Liquidation Notice', *The London Gazette*, 10 September 1940 (J13/17317)

<sup>441</sup> This pooling of resources and space was facilitated by the government's relaxation of restrictions on the number of employees allowed in the workrooms.

developed.<sup>442</sup> For Stiebel, the change in dress was ‘frightful’ and he believed it was underpinned by a social attitude that meant women could ‘forget all about fashion and go about just as they liked’.<sup>443</sup> In the first three months of war, he found the way women ‘walked about Bond Street and Piccadilly with no hats and those disgusting slacks [...particularly] horrible’.<sup>444</sup> Madge Garland (the Editor of British *Vogue*) described the ‘dastardly’ behaviour she witnessed develop in British women’s fashion, which saw ‘extreme carelessness and slackness add to the horror of sandbags and stripped windows’.<sup>445</sup> In her view this was a ‘fatal attitude [... as] once you start letting yourself go, nothing is going to matter. It reflects on your mental attitude’.<sup>446</sup> However both Stiebel and Garland professed a strong belief that these dress attitudes would primarily affect lower middle-class business and that the clientele of London’s couture ‘would never quite let themselves go,’ even if the type and quantity of clothing they consumed altered.<sup>447</sup>

The milliner Aage Thaarup pointed out, however, that the government’s air raid precautions and curtailment of evening entertainments meant that the market for eveningwear, a key component within the creative output of many of London’s couturiers, ‘evaporated almost overnight’.<sup>448</sup> The court-based activities of the social season were suspended for the duration of the war, and dress codes were immediately relaxed even at London’s most exclusive and convention-bound hotels and restaurants.<sup>449</sup> Mary Joyce (the editor of *Women’s Wear News*) informed Mass Observation that this led a ‘number of high-end dressmakers’ to send ‘beautifully dressed mannequins’ into restaurants to encourage the reinstatement of pre-war dress codes.<sup>450</sup> However, these new social attitudes were difficult to dispel. Donald Barber (secretary of the Retail Distributor’s Association) considered the change ubiquitous and claimed that he had been in the Mayfair Hotel for two hours in the first week of

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<sup>442</sup> Madge Garland, MOI, 15 December 1939, (TC 18 – Box 2)

<sup>443</sup> Victor Stiebel, MOI, 1 December 1939, (TC 18 – Box 2) Similar views were also reported in ‘Fashions On Tour,’ *Birmingham Post*, 16 October 1939 and Joanne Chase, ‘Dress House Goes On Tour’, *Overseas Daily Mail*, 21 October 1939

<sup>444</sup> Stiebel, MOI, 1 December 1939

<sup>445</sup> Garland, MOI, 15 December 1939

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>447</sup> Stiebel, MOI, 1 December 1939.

<sup>448</sup> Aage Thaarup, MOI, 6 December 1939 (TC 18 – Box 2)

<sup>449</sup> Ann Seymour, (wife of Digby Morton) Fashion Editor of *Woman & Beauty*, MOI, 6 December 1939, (TC 18 – Box 2)

<sup>450</sup> Mary Joyce (Editor of *Woman’s Wear News*) MOI, 7 December 1939 (TC18 – Box 2)



Figure 70: Lelong's Black Jersey Dinner Dress from 'Dress Down to Dress Up', *Vogue*, December 1939, p.45

November 1939 and 'only seen one woman in evening dress'.<sup>451</sup> The new dress codes at restaurants in London hotels such as the Dorchester and Claridge's were set out in the December issue of *Vogue*. In line with these stipulations the magazine encouraged its readers to 'Dress Down to Dress Up'.<sup>452</sup> This did not however negate the role of fashion or couture production rather it promoted a new silhouette and featured images of 'demure' Parisian dinner dresses by Lelong and Alix, fitted to the throat with slim skirts (Figure 70).<sup>453</sup> The styles featured in *Vogue* reflected the consumption patterns at Stiebel's dress house where his clients, as soon as war was declared, immediately rejected the frivolity and romanticism of 1930s eveningwear. He informed Mass Observation, that his 'ladies [... were] not buying evening dresses at all, except at a pinch ones made in wool with long sleeves, up to the neck and buttoned down the front'.<sup>454</sup> The austere, almost modest nature of the new styles of dinner dress, whilst practical and a reaction to an altered social arena, were also indicative of changes in social attitudes towards the consumption of luxury goods.

Whilst *Vogue* could quickly react to the changes in sartorial conventions, for many sectors of the fashion industry this new silhouette, in terms of production and supply, was particularly inopportune. War was declared as dressmakers and wholesalers prepared to present their new collections and this changed aesthetic direction left many producers with useless stock. For the previous three seasons, both London and Paris couturiers had shown a convergence in style, and fashion magazines such as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* had promoted their decrees for flamboyant crinoline dresses with corseted waists. Even Molyneux, renowned for his simple, slim-fitting styles had produced exaggerated crinolines: an example is held by the Victoria and Albert Museum and shown in Figure 71. Many of the styles prepared for presentation across the industry corresponded with this ostentatious silhouette and were now incongruous at a time of war. The secretary of the Draper's Chamber of Trade (the national organisation that represented traders in the distribution and retail of textile goods) claimed that as consumer taste moved towards more practical styles, not only couture but also 'all

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<sup>451</sup> Donald Barber (Secretary of Retail Distributor's Association) and J.M. Paynton (Secretary of Draper's Chamber of Trade), MOI, November 1939 (TC 18 – Box 2) Similar observations were made by a number of industry observers for Mass Observation.

<sup>452</sup> 'Dress Down to Dress Up,' *Vogue*, December 1939, pp. 44 – 45

<sup>453</sup> Ibid.

<sup>454</sup> Victor Stiebel, MOI, 1 December 1939





Figure 71: Edward Molyneux Evening Dress, 1939

fashion stocks in the shops were completely dead as mutton'.<sup>455</sup>

In comparison to many other sectors of the British fashion industry the couturiers' production was on a small scale and press reports of the September Collections indicate that many postponed their shows by a week to replace many models with practical war appropriate designs.<sup>456</sup> This left many of them with a considerable amount of their business collateral invested in models that had been designed and produced prior to the declaration of war. In December 1939, as a response, a number of these made-to-measure businesses, under the guidance of Edward Molyneux, held their first London-based collaborative wartime dress show. Entitled *Fashion Marches On*, it took the form of a charitable gala and was held at the Dorchester hotel. Analysis of the clothes presented, to an audience of five hundred members of high society, demonstrates that the designers' overriding aim was to present the elaborate gowns discarded from many September collections. This first wartime instance of the couturiers working together was a blatant appeal to their clients to continue to dress in their pre-war manner and to support the London dress houses. This was the first collaborative showcase in which Hartnell and Worth, whose reputations rested on their production of elaborate eveningwear, participated. They had both resisted inclusion in the Fashion Group showings to American buyers. However, the arrival of Molyneux and the sponsorship of eveningwear encouraged their showings in a joint show.

The introductory text in this gala's programme, written by Lady Hart-Dyke (a producer of English raw silk with a commercial interest in luxury fashion) shows that the primary objective was to challenge the idea that the purchase of elaborate dress was frivolous and therefore unpatriotic.<sup>457</sup> Whilst Hart-Dyke acknowledged that consumers needed to economise for the 'wellbeing of the country' she made clear that this social attitude would destroy the fashion industry and argued that the support of the luxury trades was in fact a national duty:

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<sup>455</sup> J.M. Paynton, MOI, November 1939. The Draper's Chamber of Trade of Great Britain and Ireland was established in 1899 to protect and further the interest of drapers and allied traders. It dealt with any problems that affected retail textile distributors. For further detail see, Albert Gowie, 'The Draper's Chamber of Trade of Great Britain and Ireland', *Journal of the Textile Institute Proceedings*, Volume 29, Issue 7, 1938, Taylor & Francis Online.

<sup>456</sup> 'Mayfair Plans Cycling Skirts,' *Daily Mail*, 19 September 1939, 'Frocks For Early Evening Air Raids,' *The Star*, 11 October 1939, 'What The Fashions Will Be This Winter,' *Draper's Organiser*, October 1939 (VSPA/ADD/1994)

<sup>457</sup> 'Fashion Marches On' Programme 12 December 1939 (MO/18/2/F). In England (in the late thirties) Lady Hart-Dyke was the only producer of British raw silk on a practical scale. Dyke silk was grown at Lullingstone Castle, Kent from 1932, in reaction to inheritance tax, but also the end of free trade, when imported silk was heavily taxed.





Figure 72: Programme for the 'Fashion Marches On!' Charity Gala, Grosvenor House London, 12 December 1939

Whether you like it or whether you don't, Fashion is going on. The last war didn't stop it. The French Revolution didn't stop it. This war certainly won't stop it! So don't be ashamed of fashion. Don't think it unnecessary because times may be hard [...] you must continue to buy the best to look your best. It means you daren't ration fashion (which is part of the heritage for which we are fighting) it means you must continue to live graciously, dress elegantly, and shop cheerfully. War isn't a challenge to fashion. War is a challenge to women to remain fashionable. And for that reason you can congratulate yourself. By coming here this evening you have accepted that challenge.<sup>458</sup>

This charitable gala therefore positioned the consumption of fashion within a specifically female articulation of the ideals of philanthropy, altruism and patriotism. In order to stabilize the nation's economy, this collaborative event encouraged the wealthy audience to remain active consumers and therefore to perform their patriotism through consumption.<sup>459</sup> This complicated the wartime desire to dismiss the purchase of luxury products as vain and hedonistic. The titles to the show segments such as; 'You Can't Ration Fashion', 'Look Your Part' and 'Out of Uniform into our Evening Dress' were blatant propaganda to encourage the audience to view the perpetuation of a lavish dress culture as imperative to the continuation, not only of couture, but of English culture itself.

Nowhere was this ideological attack on restraint more blatant than in the pre-war styles of the evening dresses, which were mainly romantic confections with full skirts in chiffon, sequins and lace. The daywear shown by Hartnell and Paquin, which was dominated by silk and crepe dresses and fur trimmings on suits and coats, also ignored the war and followed pre-war conventions. The presentation of more practical woollen coats and dresses was left to the made-to-measure departments of Jaeger, Harrods, Aquascutum and Jacqmar. The only couturiers to present garments that noticeably responded to the war were Molyneux, who included dinner suits, and Stiebel and Morton who presented the new daywear they had designed for the Fashion Group's aforementioned provincial shows in Liverpool, Manchester, Cheltenham and Bristol.

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<sup>458</sup> Programme Introduction to the Fashion Gala, Grosvenor House (In aid of Frances Day's Penny Fund), 2 December 1939, 'General Fashion Reports and ephemera 1939 – 40' (18/2/F Mass Observation Archive, Sussex)

<sup>459</sup> For similar ideas in an American context see Charles F. McGovern, *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890 – 1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). Also in relation to the charitable fashion shows produced by the English designer Lucile in the First World War see Marlis Schweitzer, 'Patriotic Acts of Consumption: Lucile (Lady Duff Gordon) and the Vaudeville Fashion Show Craze,' *Theatre Journal*, 60 (The John Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp. 585 - 608

*Siren into Suit*

Digby Morton, famous tailleur, created this trouser suit in a bright tartan 'Viyella.' Beautifully warm to slip on over night-things in an emergency, with a hidey hood to cover your head. A lightning zip fastens it and military buttons trim the four patch pockets.

**Viyella Thirty-six** FASHION FABRICS

'Viyella' Thirty-six Fashion Fabrics—plain shades and marls, blouse checks and stripes, 5/9 a yard. Lovely dress designs in novel woven effects, 6/9 a yard. All 36 inches wide.

WILLIAM HOLLINS AND COMPANY LIMITED, VIYELLA HOUSE, NOTTINGHAM, ENGLAND

Figure 73: Digby Morton 'Siren' trouser suit, *Vogue*, December 1939

In the Fashion Group's final shows that took place outside the capital, both Stiebel and Morton had been careful not to appear unpatriotic in the stimulation of demand for elaborate dress. The models presented in the provinces focused on tailored daywear with practical design features. Stiebel, for example, included cycling suits with functional culottes and built-in hoods and Morton designed a 'siren' trouser suit. The latter, an all-in-one design in heavy wool that could be worn over day or nightwear in preparation for an air raid, received a large amount of popular recognition as it was featured in Viyella's promotional campaign (Figure 73).<sup>460</sup> This textile company had previously ignored the English designers and used Schiaparelli for its prestige advertising.<sup>461</sup> With Schiaparelli, who had tried to relocate to London at the outbreak of war, subject to removal from Britain as an alien national, this commission was one of the first indications of the new opportunities for London designers to work in collaboration with the British textile industry.<sup>462</sup> In the Viyella advert Morton is declared a 'famous tailleur' who could prepare his clients to be confident citizens perpetually ready for an air raid. The image it presented was of an active woman; ready and alert, with gas mask and lamp. The advert claimed that the design of her impeccably tailored suit with 'lightning zip' was constructed so that it could be thrown on 'over night things in an emergency'. The 'hidey hood to cover your head', if caught without proper grooming, allowed the wearer to stay 'beautifully warm' and therefore be practical without the negation of her femininity. As a solution to wartime needs this trouser suit, with its distinctive military buttons, was a clear example of the adaptability of couture tailoring to new social requirements. These Fashion Group arranged shows also saw the narrative that had been constructed in the late 1930s, of London as the centre for hard tailored couture, now bring further validation to this form of luxury production as it was adapted to a wartime need for practicality.

This was important, as it was already noticeable to many of the couturiers, within three months of the declaration of hostilities that their customers took up immediate active participation in the war effort. Stiebel informed Mass Observation that by December 1939, the majority of his clientele was already 'connected with some war work or other – ambulance driving, canteen, looking after evacuees, knitting for troops [...]

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<sup>460</sup> For an example of this advertising campaign see *Vogue*, December 1939

<sup>461</sup> For an example of the Schiaparelli and Viyella advert see *Vogue* 18 August 1937. There was one short-lived exception when Viyella used Norman Hartnell in one set of adverts in 1936, *Vogue* March 1936

<sup>462</sup> For details of Schiaparelli's forced removal from Britain see, 'Elsa Schiaparelli File', National Archive, FO 837/284



they all want to do something to help'.<sup>463</sup> This attitude was reflected in the pages of *Vogue*, which in November 1939 renamed its society column 'Our Lives in Wartime London', and changed its focus from reports of society women's usual round of leisure activities to their engagement in the war effort.<sup>464</sup> This column continued to note the link between specific designers and their customers, but now concentrated on the practicality of the design of their newly purchased clothing. The first of these columns, as just one example, described two of Molyneux's clients actively wearing his tailored daywear, Lady Baldwin as an ambulance driver and Lady Long as a nurse. It also noted Mrs Ronald Aird at work in the auxiliary fire service in a Peter Russell suit and Mrs Peter Thursby at an all-night canteen in her WVS (Women's Voluntary Service) uniform, which was designed by Digby Morton.<sup>465</sup>

The dress of the WVS was not a typical example of a mass-produced and regulated uniform. This was not simply because it was designed by a couturier, but because of the nature of the organisation itself. The social historian Arthur Marwick has described the majority of the membership of this Service as 'extremely upper-class'.<sup>466</sup> The Women's Voluntary Service was set up by the social philanthropist Lady Reading at the request of the government to aid in the implementation of its 'Air Raid Precautions Act' of January 1938.<sup>467</sup> Its committees were created to oversee and administer the work done by women in the country's many pre-existing voluntary organisations and its initial and most visible members were from the higher levels of Britain's class system, with many drawn from within Lady Reading's own social circle. The uniform was non-compulsory as it was costly and had to be purchased privately.<sup>468</sup> Every uniform was made (under Morton's direction) in the Knightsbridge department store Harrods, which later, as membership swiftly expanded, began to supply them to twenty outlets around the country. The diary of Mrs Diana Brinton-Lee (a WVS wartime volunteer) reveals how the lines of class definition were clearly recognisable in the way the WVS uniform was worn. At her first attendance at a WVS meeting in 1940, it documents her, 'glancing round the room, [at] shining sculptured heads, and elegant figures in [what she

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<sup>463</sup> Victor Stiebel, *MOI*, 1 December 1939

<sup>464</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 1 the previous title of this column was 'Our Lives From Day to Day'.

<sup>465</sup> 'Our Lives in Wartime London', *Vogue*, November 1939, p.34

<sup>466</sup> Arthur Marwick, *Class: Image and Reality in Britain, France and the USA since 1930* (London: Collins, 1980), p. 219

<sup>467</sup> The main objectives of the voluntary support that could be offered are set out by the Home Office in *Air Raid Precautions, What You Can Do* (London: HMSO, 1938)

<sup>468</sup> Later in the war as membership expanded many less wealthy members of the Service undertook their work whilst simply wearing a WVS badge on their lapels.



Figure 74: WVS Jacket, skirt and Blouse designed by Digby Morton, June 1939



Figure 75: WVS Dress, introduced at a later date. This image demonstrates the modification made to the uniform.



Figure 76: Hon. Pearl Lawson-Johnson and Lady Reading in WVS uniform

described as] Savile Row tunics, which fell open to reveal ties pinned to the shirt bosom with large regimental diamond brooches'.<sup>469</sup> This individualisation went against the central property of any uniform, which Nathan Joseph has pointed out operates 'above all as a method of maintaining rigorous adherence to norms'.<sup>470</sup> It was this conformity that ensured that the uniformed woman, whilst a particularly prevalent image in magazines, newspapers and advertisements throughout the war, was not universally liked. This attitude has been studied by the literary historian Jenny Hartley who has noted that female uniforms were placed near the top of the *Daily Mail's* poll of 'Wartime Grouches'. She argues that the ambivalence felt by many women 'on the one hand a desire to join the war effort and participate in the people's war, and on the other hand a resistance to being dictated to by the state – is exemplified perfectly in the selection and wearing of the WVS uniform'.<sup>471</sup>

The subversive nature of the way this uniform could be worn was a fundamental part of the original concept and reason why Lady Reading chose her couturier to design it. She claimed that adaptability was a crucial element of the uniform, a symbolic demonstration of the fact that WVS members 'should do the same job in different ways, each of them translating their personality into it'.<sup>472</sup> It could be argued that in 'personality' Reading was referring most specifically to her members' social position. Figures 74 to 76 demonstrate that Morton designed this uniform, in 1939, as a version of his fashionable town and country wear; with a well-cut woollen coat, jacket and skirt in that season's distinctive colour palette of green and burgundy.<sup>473</sup> Charles Graves, the historian of the WVS organisation, has documented how successfully its wearers adapted this design to avoid sartorial conformity. He points out two specific instances where the fact that WVS members' were wearing uniform was overlooked. Firstly, when King George VI asked Lady Reading if her organisation was going to have uniforms and she was forced to reply yes, Sir. I am wearing one' and secondly, when Winston Churchill commented 'in disgust' on the sartorial 'lack of unity' in a WVS parade.<sup>474</sup>

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<sup>469</sup> Brinton-Lee, *Diary Entry for 17 – 23 August 1940* (Imperial War Museum, Cat. No. 9761, August 1940 – May 1941)

<sup>470</sup> Nathan Joseph, *Uniforms and Nonuniforms: Communication through Clothing Contributions in Sociology* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986), p.61

<sup>471</sup> Jenny Hartley, 'Warriors and Healers, Impostors and Mothers: Betty Miller's "On the Side of the Angels," in *Dressing Up For War: Transformations of Gender and Genre in the Discourse and Literature of War*, edited by Aranzzu Usandizaga and Andrew Monnickendam (Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., 2001) p.180

<sup>472</sup> Charles Graves, *Women in Green: The Story of the WVS* (London: Heinemann, 1948), p. 31

<sup>473</sup> The colours of the WVS uniform adhered to the British Colour Council's trend predictions and had been used throughout Morton's couture collection of June 1939 (DMPB)

<sup>474</sup> Graves, p.38

To ensure both a high level of distinctiveness and fit many of the wealthier members of the WVS employed their own dressmakers to alter the ready-made uniforms.<sup>475</sup> This practice, across a range of service uniforms, brought in new custom for made-to-measure businesses and its commercial importance in sustaining many workrooms is made apparent in the account books of the house of Lachasse. One such example was the Hon. Mrs. Forbes-Adam of Skipton Hall, 'Yorkshire, who increased her pre-war consumption of one new suit a year, to three in October 1939, then returned in April 1940 and June 1942 to have her 'service uniform' remodelled and altered.<sup>476</sup> Wartime uniforms therefore offer an interesting example of the perpetuation of their wearers' desire for not only individuality but also class differentiation. This exposes certain psychological and social factors that ensured a continued demand for made-to-measure clothing. The manner in which the WVS uniform was adapted correlates with Peter McNeil's previous research into the contemporary representation of fashion in magazines and news reports, which refutes the idea that wartime mobilisation resulted in a democratization of clothing and concludes that 'class seems to have been ever visible in both service and civilian dress'.<sup>477</sup> For Digby Morton, the change in sartorial needs, particularly in the first year of the war, was to prove financially beneficial.<sup>478</sup> He claimed that to meet new demand his business increased by 25 per cent and was busier in the season the war broke out than in the same period in 1938.<sup>479</sup> The continuation of class distinction in dress, particularly for the upper-middle and upper class, therefore ensured that the move towards the consumption of practical daywear and uniforms was not detrimental to but supplemented couture production.

During the first year of war the need for new clothing therefore brought in business for the London couturiers. However, towards the end of 1940 Britain's position within the war began to deteriorate, as the Blitz, the German Luftwaffe's long-feared bombing campaign began. From the 7<sup>th</sup> of September 1940 London suffered 57 consecutive nights of raids. Mayfair received heavy damage, with Bruton Street, Bond

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<sup>475</sup> For a perceptive analysis of this occurring in men's service dress see John Berger, *About Looking, Writers and Readers Cooperative* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1980), pp. 30 - 31

<sup>476</sup> Lachasse Ltd., ladies dressmakers, milliners and tailors: records, ca.1930 – 1981 (AAD/1989/6)

<sup>477</sup> Peter McNeil, 'Put Your Best Face Forward': The Impact of the Second World War on British Dress', *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 6, No. 4. (1993), pp. 283 – 299

<sup>478</sup> Anne Seymour, MOI, 6 December 1939

<sup>479</sup> Digby Morton, MOI, 24 April 1940 (TC18 – Box 2). In response to this rise in demand, he took on more female employees and had between sixty and seventy people producing clothing with twelve staff in the administration and the showroom.



Street and Park Lane hit on the eleventh day of bombing.<sup>480</sup> Although wartime diaries show daily and commercial life in these streets to be ‘carrying on as usual’, the intensity of the bombing brought both physical and psychological restrictions to the continuation of couture production as working in London became more precarious.<sup>481</sup> The fashion industry was then put under further pressure by the government’s decision to implement purchase taxation to curb demand and raise revenue. House of Commons debates, from August 1940, show the negative wartime attitude of many members of parliament towards luxury production. The tone of the debates are made clear by one MP’s call for the Chancellor of the Exchequer not to be ‘the least bit tender about taxing luxuries, if necessary, out of existence’.<sup>482</sup> The argument that revenue generation could contract if people stopped buying these products was recognised, however, as this MP argued ‘if in a total war, we cannot use our labour more usefully than in luxury production, then we are still not waging total war in the economic field and in the field of labour’.<sup>483</sup> There were however parliamentary calls for clothing to be exempt from any future taxation, for as another MP claimed it would represent ‘a very poor reward to our women’.<sup>484</sup> Ministers opposed to taxation also argued that it would be a tax on the poor, who would be ‘obliged to consume and purchase less, but [in comparison] if you place a tax on the rich, it does not affect them at all [...] Those who pay 100 guineas for a fur coat will willingly pay 150 guineas for the same fur coat.’<sup>485</sup> Despite such opposition Purchase Tax was imposed on all consumer goods in October 1940, which saw the cost of clothing rise by an enormous 69 per cent at the point of sale.<sup>486</sup>

Throughout the first year of the war the business objectives of many of the London couturiers focused primarily on the British market. However, as the political climate grew increasingly antagonistic toward luxury production, the end of 1940 saw the commercial viability of many of the dress houses placed under pressure. With the introduction of this new tax, *Vogue* rallied to support the couturiers’ businesses. In December 1940, in an unprecedented move, it produced a six-page feature that

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<sup>480</sup> Hilda Neal, *Diary Entry, 18 September 1940* (Imperial War Museum, Cat. No. 11987, Subject Period 1939 – 1975)

<sup>481</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>482</sup> Malcolm McMillian, MP for the Western Isles, House of Commons Debate: CLAUSE 18 – charge and commencement of Purchase Tax, 8 August 1940, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1940>

<sup>483</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>484</sup> Mr. Barnes MP for East Ham South, *House of Commons Debate*, 8 August 1940, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1940>

<sup>485</sup> House of Commons Debate: CLAUSE 18. — Charge and commencement of Purchase Tax, 8 August 1940, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1940/aug/08/clause-18>

<sup>486</sup> As the Chancellor pointed out the exclusion of clothing would have meant the exemption of ‘a taxable field of over £315,000,000.’ *House of Commons Debate*, 8 August 1940

explained and defended the high cost of a made-to-measure tailored outfit. The photographs by Lee Miller, of mannequins in perfectly tailored garments holding scissors and posed with dressmaker's dummies, visually capture the main message of the article. Figure 77 illustrates that the focus was on the promotion and protection of the inherent craft skills needed to create the perfect fitted garment. As the article pointed out:

This is the thing London does best – and, in this field, London's best is the best in the world [...] It is this combination of high quality, careful cut, hand work and skilled fitting which ensures the good line and long life of a suit. If the design is good there is no question of such a garment dating. Therefore good tailoring is not expensive in the long run [...] all in all, it's this fanatically high standard that put London tailoring at the top and holds it there, to be the principle grounds of our fashion prestige, the principal impetus of our fashion exports.<sup>487</sup>

This proclamation reversed *Vogue's* customary promotion of couture from being a sign of fashionability and conspicuous consumption to a long-term investment and indicator of frugality. In the suggestion that buying these clothes was not only an investment in these specific businesses but in the nation as a whole, it also pointed to the potential role the couturiers could play in the export agenda. This *Vogue* article was therefore a response not only to increased domestic taxation but also, in its claim that the couturiers should be viewed as a 'principal impetus' in Britain's export campaign, an acknowledgement of how the couturiers' business objectives needed to adapt in line with a new political agenda.

In June 1940, political economists had shifted their focus from mobilization and set out a new *White Paper* to increase 'dollar-earning exports' wherever they could be produced 'without detriment to war production'.<sup>488</sup> It was at this point, that the need for formal collaboration to increase the export potential of British design, a pre-war aspiration of both the Fashion Group and many reform bodies in all fields of design, began to receive both industrial and governmental support. In the textile industry, the new export agenda led to the immediate establishment of centralised export groups.<sup>489</sup>

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<sup>487</sup> 'Tailored Tradition', *Vogue*, December 1940, p.32

<sup>488</sup> War Cabinet Office, 'Urgent Economic Problems', 1940, quoted in W.K. Hancock and M. M. Gowing, *British War Economy (H.S.M.O., 1949)*, p.210

<sup>489</sup> The separate export groups were created to represent the cotton, wool, rayon, lace, silk, hosiery and hat industries.



Figure 77: Lachasse Suit, Photographer Lee Miller, 'Tailored Tradition', *Vogue*, December 1940, p. 35

Many of these groups were created on the basis of an array of existing trade associations, however this move was the first comprehensive organisation that had ever existed in this fragmented industry.<sup>490</sup> Although this new political stipulation also had immediate and important implications for the couturiers they did not, as the next section of this chapter will demonstrate, immediately follow suit and rush to establish the Incorporated Society.

### **3:2) 'Britain Delivers the Goods': London Couture the 'Shop window' for the Wartime Export Campaign**

As the export policy became fully operational, it was to have an impact not only on the way the couture industry presented itself but also on the consolidation of a particular network that supported its continuation. Analysis of the couturiers' mediation across a range of fashion magazines and newspaper reports, demonstrates a shift from a focus on practicality and a defence of luxury production, to the economic role the designers could play in the export campaign.<sup>491</sup> An example, taken from *Harper's Bazaar* in February 1941 entitled 'Exports – from Zero to £500,000' exemplifies the altered narrative that now surrounded the London couture. It focused on the arrival of Edward Molyneux in London from Paris, 'an experienced and successful exporter' and claimed that his relocation represented an opportunity to 'transplant the economic viability of Paris onto Mayfair' (Figure 78).<sup>492</sup> This article, which drew on a letter Molyneux had sent to the Board of Trade, concentrated on the economic relevance of his two export collections of 1940.<sup>493</sup> The designs included in these collections had often focused on a demonstration of their Britishness, for example they included the 'Smoking' and the 'Coster' dresses seen in Figures 79 and 80. The latter made a nationally specific reference to the dress culture of London's 'Pearly Queens', whilst the former used the latest unique repeat print of cigarette butts from the British firm Asher to demonstrate the

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<sup>490</sup> For details of the fragmented nature of the textile industry prior to the war see: Board of Trade, *An Industrial Survey of the Lancashire Area* (London: HMSO, 1932), Alan Fowler, 'Lancashire Cotton Trade Unionism in the Inter-war Years' in *Employers and Labour in the English Textile Industries, 1850 – 1939* edited by J. A. Jowitt and A. J. McIvor (London: Routledge, 1988)

<sup>491</sup> For further consideration of the economic implications of the change in the war effort see Hancock and Gowing, 1949, pp. 118 – 120

<sup>492</sup> 'Exports – from Zero to £500,000', *Harper's Bazaar*, February 1941, p.9

For clarity: in the 1930s Molyneux opened a house in London but remained based in Paris, during the war he moved himself and his full operation to London.

<sup>493</sup> W. M Hill (Department of Overseas Trade), Memo on letter from Captain Molyneux, 16 January 1941 (BT61/78/4)



novelty and creativity available in British fabrics. Molyneux, as a specific example of the commerciality of these collections, pointed to the case of one American import house, which bought forty-four models. He estimated that the reproduction of these garments alone, in terms of model and textile sales for repeat reproduction, secured a net total of over \$19,000.<sup>494</sup> He also claimed that throughout North America there was 'the potential for about twenty other houses to order on this scale, with many smaller importers also taking between two to five models a season'.<sup>495</sup> *Harper's Bazaar* took these estimates to inform its readers that his business alone had helped to build up an export trade that 'provided England with three million American dollars [...] all placed at the disposal of the British Government'. In a carefully worded piece of propaganda it encouraged its readers to 'work out' what 'that meant in terms of ships, aircraft or ammunition'.<sup>496</sup>

It was after the release of the aforementioned export *White Paper*, that the Department of Overseas Trade invited Molyneux to a meeting and asked him to bring together a number of couturiers to create the showcase for South America, to tour Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, Montevideo and Sao Paulo between March and May 1941.<sup>497</sup> Board of Trade accounts for this export show demonstrate the unprecedented level of cooperation and organisation now offered to the London couture industry. The government immediately took an unprecedented step and committed just over £5,000 to finance the promotion of this venture.<sup>498</sup> This sum included payment for five thousand copies of the exhibition's programme and its translation into three (unspecified) South American languages.<sup>499</sup> The sum also financed double-page magazine advertisements in *Art and Industry*, *International Textiles*, and *Vogue*, all of which had a substantial circulation in

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<sup>494</sup> This estimation was based on approximately twenty-five repeats of each garment requiring, on average, fifteen pounds worth of English material.

<sup>495</sup> Edward Molyneux, quoted in 'Exports – from Zero to £500,000', *Harper's Bazaar*, February 1941, p.9

<sup>496</sup> 'Exports – from Zero to £500,000', *Harper's Bazaar*, February 1941, p.9

<sup>497</sup> 'Fashion and Fabrics Tour of South American 1941,' *Board of Trade File* (BT61/78/4)

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>499</sup> The Board of Trade records do not mention which three languages these were. The lack of thorough research undertaken by the Board of Trade into the actual workings of the separate markets in the different countries of South America, alongside the lack of documentation or analysis of the exports generated by the campaign, suggest that, rather than a revenue raising venture, the government was more interested in this export collection as propaganda to demonstrate that Britain could pay its debts.



Figure 78: (Top) Image that accompanied the article 'Exports – from Zero to £500,000', *Harper's Bazaar*, February 1941

Figure 79: (Bottom) Molyneux's 'Smoking' Dress from his 1940 London collection



Figure 80: Molyneux's 'Coster' Dress from his 1940 London Collection

South America.<sup>500</sup> Some of the £5,000 was then used for the production and international distribution of over two thousand copies of a special 'South American tour' edition of *Harper's Bazaar*.<sup>501</sup> Out of this budget a further £2,047 was allocated to pre-exhibition advertising in South America and a further £500 for entertainment. To ensure a locally astute post-exhibition publicity campaign the Sao Paulo branch of the well-established Lintas advertising company was then hired, at the cost of £900.<sup>502</sup> In Britain, in order to boost morale, the Ministry of Information was given responsibility for the exhibition's internal promotion and an additional budget. Its 'Industrial Publicity Unit' organised and paid over £700 to show the outgoing collection at a press reception at the Dorchester Hotel in London. A display was also financed in the Midlands and North Country alongside the annual press previews of new fabrics organised by the British Colour Council. To ensure the industrial relevance of the written elements of the exhibition's promotion Alison Settle and Margaret Havinden (who were both original members of the Fashion Group's board) were commissioned to write the programme and official press releases.

This coordinated and specific use of funds guaranteed a highly visible and controlled mediation of the South American showcase throughout national and international newspapers, magazines, newsreel features and radio broadcasts. In response to these initiatives Board of Trade representatives claimed the press in South America had responded 'heroically to the event' and that publicity had also appeared 'very widely' in Canada and the Dominions.<sup>503</sup> The Ministry of Information also documented five hundred and seven carefully orchestrated references to the 'London Fashion Collection' in British newspaper reports.<sup>504</sup> This ensured that the London couture industry and the nine designers that participated received a level of both national and international recognition unknown before the war.

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<sup>500</sup> The first source had a paid circulation of 1,500 copies per month in South America, the second of 1600 copies. *Vogue* as a gesture of goodwill, on receiving £160 from the government, in comparison to £10 and £81 respectively paid to the other magazines, agreed to reprint the advertisement and send it with a covering letter, in Spanish and Portuguese, to all dress manufacturers, wholesalers, and retailers in Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay. (BT61/78/4)

<sup>501</sup> 'Fashion and Fabrics Tour of South American 1941,' *Board of Trade File* (BT61/78/4)

<sup>502</sup> W. M Hill (Department of Overseas Trade), letter to F. Hollings (Board of Trade), 1 January 1941, (BT61/78/4) Lintas was a successful and well-established advertising company with a developed understanding of advertising internationally. The company had begun in 1899 as an in-house advertising agency for Lever Brothers, the British soap company, who were early users of large-scale advertising. It had become an independent advertising agency in 1930. The company undertook an extensive promotional campaign across Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, Venezuela, Peru, Colombia, Ecuador and Bolivia.

<sup>503</sup> Robert Williamson (Industrial Publicity Unit of the Ministry of Information), letter to W. M. Hill (Department of Overseas Trade), 4 June 1941 (BT61/78/4)

<sup>504</sup> *Ibid.*



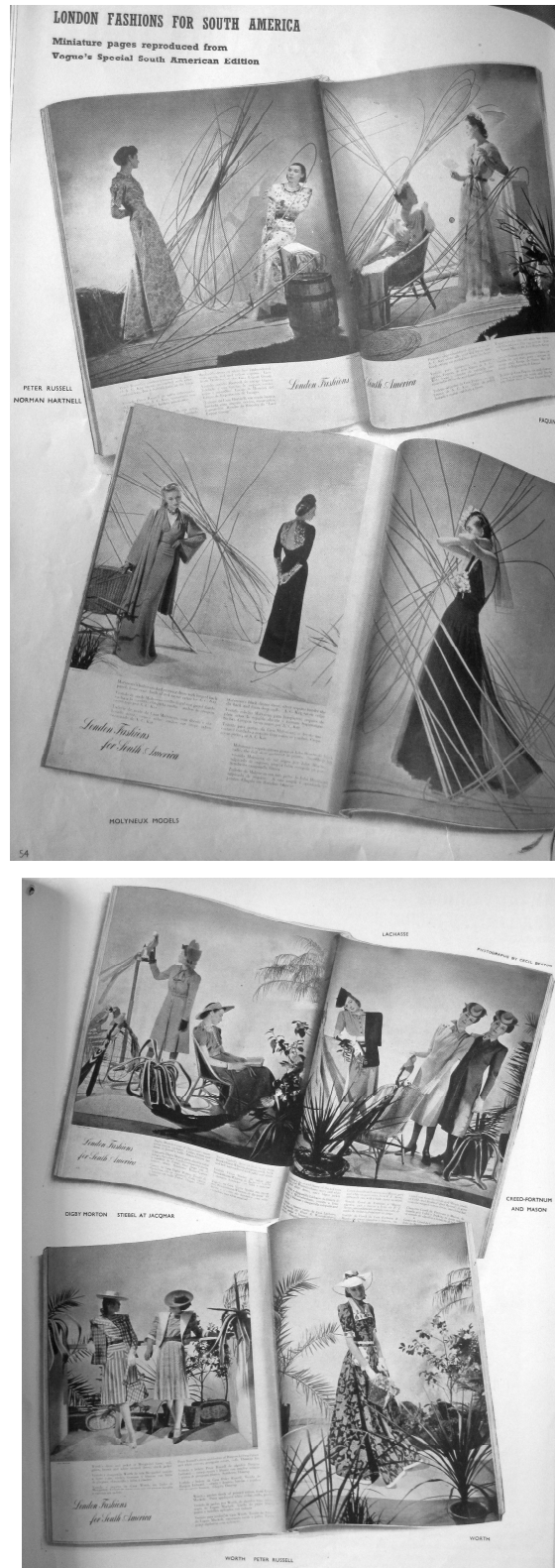


Figure 81: Vogue's reproduction of the programme produced for the South American Couture Showcase. *Vogue*, May 1941

This opportunity for free promotion was unprecedented for the designers. Previous collaborative export shows, such as the aforementioned 'Queen Mary' showcase of 1936 and the Fashion Group's presentations for American buyers, had in the main all been self-financed. Now, as part of the export drive, the couturiers saw the promotion of their collective showcase fully supported and financed by the British government. This level of expenditure on the promotion of these individual businesses would have been improbable without the circumstances of war. The government had never previously demonstrated an interest in financing the promotion of this luxury trade and, due to its endorsement of particular businesses at the expense of others, was in danger of accusations of industrial bias. The government support was not however given merely to ensure the continuation of these made-to-measure dress houses; the main political justification was to use the garments of these creative practitioners to act as a 'shop window' for the promotion of Britain's textile industry.<sup>505</sup> To a certain extent, this was prompted by the fear of repeating the loss of foreign markets experienced during World War One for what was Britain's third largest industry.<sup>506</sup> Sir Cecil Weir (Executive Member of the British Export Council) voiced this political agenda in an editorial in *Harper's Bazaar*, and highlighted the 'double effect' the South American showcase had for 'increasing export opportunities for fashion clothes and for the materials from which they are made and bringing in currency for many things we need in fighting this war to a victorious conclusion'.<sup>507</sup>

Despite this mediated support, Board of Trade records show that there was a sense of political unease in the sponsorship of this form of luxury production. The government's initial proposal for South America was not only to hold a couture showcase but also 'to represent all the areas where British textiles could through quality and design operate at the higher end of the market'.<sup>508</sup> The showcase, as part of the government's 'Britain Delivers the Goods' export campaign in South America, was also intended to

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<sup>505</sup> 'Fashion and Fabrics Tour of South American 1941,' *Board of Trade File* (BT61/78/4)

<sup>506</sup> For the impact of WWI on the textile industry see Alan Fowler, 'British Textile Workers in the Lancashire Cotton and Yorkshire Wool Industries', in *The Ashgate Companion to the History of Textile Workers, 1650-2000*, ed. by Lex Heerma Van Voss, Els Hiemstra-Kuperus and Elise Van Norderveen Meerkerk (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), pp. 231 - 252. Also, John Singleton, 'The Cotton Industry and the British War Effort, 1914 - 1918,' *Economic History Review*, 47 (1994) pp. 601 - 18 and J. Jewkes, 'The Post-war Depression in the Lancashire Cotton Industry' *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 91 (1928), pp. 156 - 8, 162 - 3

<sup>507</sup> Sir Cecil Weir, 'British Fashions for South America', *Harper's Bazaar*, March 1941, p.27

<sup>508</sup> 'Fashion and Fabrics Tour of South American 1941,' *Board of Trade File* (BT61/78/4)

include interior decoration and a full range of mass-manufactured women's wear.<sup>509</sup> Board of Trade communications show that these sections never materialised because of the 'magnitude of the war effort', which made it impossible for many mass-market producers 'to devote more than a small proportion of their resources to export'.<sup>510</sup> In terms of governmental propaganda, ministerial memos demonstrate that the restriction of the tour to only couture production was seen as politically delicate and in need of careful navigation. An example of this can be seen in a letter sent by Lord Derby (patron of the British Colour Council, Cotton Board and the future Incorporated Society) to national and international press agencies. The letter, which was written at the request of the Board of Trade, was printed in its entirety in the *Melbourne Argus* and demonstrates the care taken to dispel the idea that the tour was an inappropriate 'frivolity in the midst of war'.<sup>511</sup> In it Lord Derby claimed that the showcase was:

Welcome evidence that the [British textile] industry appreciates the importance of London as a fashion centre, and is making the opportunity of demonstrating far a field that it deserves its reputation as such. Just as the famous dress houses of Paris were in fact the "shop window" for the display of the French silks, wools, and laces, so will these displays of the latest London dress models serve the same purpose for our British textiles on the other side of the Atlantic. The collection of dresses, sent out by the export groups under arrangements made by the Department of Overseas Trade, is to adorn the shop window for British dress fabrics. This collection is the result of the first united effort on the part of the fashion houses of London [...] this effort is of real importance to all branches of our textile industry it is most gratifying that they should evidence by their keen participation in this co-operative effort that they are fully alive to its significance.<sup>512</sup>

The tour, in what Derby described as its 'bold bid to retain supremacy as arbiters of world fashions', therefore aimed to increase the export of British fabrics and encourage the lucrative South American market to consider London as an important source of design authority and a replacement for Paris. This letter reveals that by 1941 the idea of London as a creative fashion centre had taken on political legitimacy and urgency.

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<sup>509</sup> This was in despite of the Colour Council contacting an array of export groups for Women's wear in Nottingham, Manchester, Bradford, Stockport, and Leicester. Robert Wilson (British Colour Council) letter to The Controller General of the Board of Overseas Trade, 4 June 1941 (BT61/78/4)

<sup>510</sup> 'Fashion and Fabrics Tour of South American 1941,' *Board of Trade File* (BT61/78/4)

<sup>511</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>512</sup> 'Exporting British Fashions: Lord Derby's Interest,' *Melbourne Argus*, 22 July 1941, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/8193497>

Export performance was important to fund the war effort, however the governmental endorsement of elite fashion also fulfilled a broader political agenda. It not only generated money for the Exchequer, by promoting the country's fashion and textile industry, but also operated as a highly visual component of national projection, which is why Hartnell described it as an 'essay in the art of export-cum-propaganda'.<sup>513</sup> By 1941 the government was under constant pressure to convince its transatlantic suppliers that Britain could pay for all of its imports. This was dictated by the neutral stance maintained by America towards the war, which left Britain unable to rely on automatic assistance. The political historian Susan Brewer has demonstrated that this led to a transatlantic propaganda campaign that promoted an image of Britain as a 'sturdy ally with only temporary economic troubles'.<sup>514</sup> In line with this political agenda, the unreserved promotion of creative made-to-measure dress should be viewed as an example of the national projection of prestige. A flamboyant and luxurious couture display was a particularly appropriate way to demonstrate that business was carrying on as usual and that Britain could literally 'deliver the goods'. For the government the couturier's role was therefore multifaceted, their practice was utilized; to boost morale for the home front; increase export by acting as a 'shop window' for British textiles; demonstrate the continued creativity of British production and prove that Britain was still a capable manufacturing nation.

To fulfil the role of 'shop window' the couturiers had to produce all their models in British fabrics. This was facilitated by the support of an array of textile manufacturers who agreed to not only produce materials to the couturiers' design specifications but also donate them without charge.<sup>515</sup> This unprecedented level of cooperation was made possible by the infrastructure offered by the newly formed textile export groups, which offered a clearly defined network through which the production and supply of fabrics could be coordinated.<sup>516</sup> The British Colour Council operated as the fulcrum within this arrangement. For four months its members undertook all the negotiations and worked with the separate textile and couture houses to coordinate the design of the models.<sup>517</sup> The Colour Council not only negotiated the supply of fabric but also convinced the

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<sup>513</sup> Hartnell, 1955, p.103

<sup>514</sup> Susan Brewer, *To Win the Peace: British Propaganda in the United States during World War II* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997), p.200. Until America entered the war, with the bombing of Pearl Harbour in December 1941, it maintained a policy of neutrality as a non-belligerent ally.

<sup>515</sup> Robert Wilson, 4 June 1941

<sup>516</sup> *Lancashire and Whitehall: The Diary of Sir Raymond Streat*, edited by Margaret Dupree (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), pp. 26 – 27.

<sup>517</sup> 'Fashion and Fabrics Tour of South American 1941,' *Board of Trade File* (BT61/78/4)

Export Groups for the cotton, wool, rayon, lace, silk, hosiery and hat industries, to provide just over £3,500 to pay the designers for their workroom costs. It also persuaded the Leather, Footwear and Allied Industries Export Group to loan all the accessories.<sup>518</sup> Robert Wilson (the Colour Council's Director) pointed out to the Board of Trade that in this way, the government and the couturiers were 'finally able to benefit from the good will we have built up with the textile industry over a number of years'.<sup>519</sup>

For the production of the South American models, the cooperation and financial commitments of an array of textile manufacturers was as exceptional as the government's funding of their promotion. Since the Colour Council was set up, in 1930, it had been one of Wilson's primary convictions that in terms of both prestige and design innovation 'British textiles need the input of the London couturiers to create a solid export market and gain a lead over the competition'.<sup>520</sup> The collaboration for the South American showcase clearly fulfilled this pre-war aspiration towards design reform. Throughout the 1930s, despite the Council's best efforts, there was only a limited level of cooperation between British couturiers and textile manufactures. Digby Morton pointed out to Mass Observation in 1942 that many designers' use of British fabrics had often been curtailed by the textile manufacturers' financially prohibitive demands that 'if they wanted exclusively designed pieces they had to pay up front and take a minimum of fifty yards'.<sup>521</sup> Apart from British tweeds, the couturiers had primarily used fabric from the continent for their collections. Research undertaken by the Man-Made Fibres Federation into the use of British textiles had shown that the importation of dress fabric had doubled in the two years that preceded war and dressmakers, at all levels of the market, had increasingly brought in fabric from France.<sup>522</sup> These consumption patterns led to both political and industrial debate, which concluded that the popularity of these imports was due to 'the fashion content' of the fabric's design.<sup>523</sup> This was constantly repeated in Board of Trade documentation and was also a key element in the initial debates that began in 1942 and led to the establishment of the state supported Council of Industrial

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<sup>518</sup> File: 'South American Fashion Exhibition: Publicity for London Fashion Collection April 1941 – April 1942' (BT61/78/4)

<sup>519</sup> 'Fashion and Fabrics Tour of South American 1941,' *Board of Trade File* (BT61/78/4).

<sup>520</sup> 'Artists and Dressmakers Collaborate in Contemporary Designs Exhibit', *Women's Wear Daily*, 15 May 1937 (HAA)

<sup>521</sup> Morton, MOI, 3 March 1942

<sup>522</sup> Fox, 1939, p. 5-6

<sup>523</sup> Fox, 1939, p. 5-6. See also Frank Pick, 'Report of the Dress Committee of the Council for Art and Industry to The Right Honourable Oliver Stanley, President of the Board of Trade: Design and the Designer in the Dress Trade' (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1939) and Hugh Dalton, *Industrial Design Memorandum by the President of the Board of Trade, for the War Cabinet Reconstruction Committee, Ministerial Committee on Industrial Problems*, 20 June 1944 (CAB 124/513)

Design, which replaced the Council of Art and Industry, in 1946. These debates noted that in comparison to many foreign fabrics the designs used by a majority of British textiles manufacturers were 'uncreative' and 'cautious' as they often relied on the reproduction of already successful French designs.<sup>524</sup> This lack of innovation is highlighted in the personal diary of Raymond Streat (the Chairman of the Cotton Board) where he noted that the cotton manufacturers in particular were characterised by 'their ability to turn out efficient but possibly hum-drum designs'.<sup>525</sup>

British cotton fabrics, due to their style, texture and low cost, had previously held little interest for the London couturiers; as they were considered inappropriate for their clients and detrimental to their reputations.<sup>526</sup> However, the cotton industry put up the largest amount of money for the 'Britain Delivers the Goods' couture showcase.<sup>527</sup> This was not only because cotton was considered particularly suitable for South America's hot climate but also because this industry's development was also a vital element in the British export agenda. The weakness in the design of British cotton fabric, which was often aimed at the lower end of the market, had caused anxious debate at the Board of Trade.<sup>528</sup> The War, which placed an embargo on foreign textiles and increased the pressure to improve the quality and competitiveness of British goods, created the opportunity for the production of more original and high quality cotton fabrics. In September 1940, the government financed the opening of the Cotton Board's Colour, Design and Style Centre in Manchester with a mission to actively improve design standards within the industry. The South American campaign offered the first chance for this new venture to demonstrate that the British cotton industry could respond to the government's design reform and export agenda, meet the needs of high-level fashion, and thereby offer a competitive substitute for fabrics previously produced on the continent or in North America.

The collaboration between the Cotton Board and the couturiers was widely disseminated in a British Council film, produced to coincide with the tour, entitled *Queen*

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<sup>524</sup> Fox, 1939, p. 5-6

<sup>525</sup> *Diary of Raymond Streat*, 1987, p.76

<sup>526</sup> 'Fashion and Fabrics Tour of South American 1941,' *Board of Trade File* (BT61/78/4)

<sup>527</sup> To pay the designers the Colour Council raised £1,100 from the Cotton Export Group, £800 from the Wool Export Group, £700 Rayon Export Group, £250 from the Lace Export Group, £160 from the Silk Export Group, £100, Hosiery Export Group (knitwear) and £50 from the Hat Export Group. (BT61/78/4)

<sup>528</sup> See *Report of the Dress Committee of the Council for Art and Industry to The Right Honourable Oliver Stanley, President of the Board of Trade: Design and the Designer in the Dress Trade* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1939)

*Cotton*.<sup>529</sup> This film began with a didactic consideration of the cotton industry's technology and skilled production techniques before it concluded with a flamboyant mannequin parade of the couturiers' models. This array of elaborate and often impractical dresses and coats was filmed in the Colour, Design and Style Centre's exhibition room in front of a small audience of fur-clad women and their male escorts (Figure 84). *Queen Cotton*, like many other British Council films, practically 'cut the war out altogether'; not only as it made no direct reference to it, but also in the elitist presentation and aesthetic of the models on display.<sup>530</sup> Yet the film's commentary, the fabrics used, and the styles presented are a particularly pertinent example of the changes instigated by the wartime economy. For example, the film's narration constantly drew the viewers' attention to the design of the textiles rather than the clothes. It focused on the 'multiple fashion-uses of cotton' not only for 'simple, inexpensive dresses' but also (as it pointed out during the presentation of the Worth model shown in Figure 83) of 'elaborate gowns that fulfill the finest ambitions of the designer's art'.<sup>531</sup> Many of the fabrics, produced to the couturiers' aesthetic specifications, were particularly distinctive and responded to Raymond Streat's design brief to 'encourage the bold and the brave rather than give endorsement to the ordinary'.<sup>532</sup> Throughout *Queen Cotton* the commentary made specific reference to this collaborative design process and pointed out that all the fabrics were 'the results of London's leading designers, working with the Lancashire mills [...] who have excelled in exploring the infinite possibilities of cotton fabric'.<sup>533</sup> This extended the definition of the couturier's role of 'shop window' from merely a source of promotion to align with the narrative, constantly endorsed by the British Fashion Group and Colour Council throughout the 1930s; that their creativity should play an important component within industrial design reform.

The styles displayed in *Queen Cotton* illustrate the couturiers' efforts to extend their design repertoire and produce clothes and fabric outside the typical boundary of English dress culture. For example, Bianca Mosca (the in-house designer at the London branch of Paquin), whose signature style usually avoided both overt prints and design

<sup>529</sup> *Queen Cotton*, directed by Cecil Musk (British Council Films, 1941) <http://film.britishcouncil.org/queencotton>, accessed 1 July 2012

<sup>530</sup> Government Cinematograph Advisor, complaint about British Council films quoted by D. W. Ellwood, 'Showing the World What it Owed to Britain: Foreign Policy and "Cultural Propaganda", 1935 – 45' in *Propaganda Politics and Film, 1918 – 45*, edited by Nicholas Pronay & D.W. Spring (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 50 – 71

<sup>531</sup> *Queen Cotton*, dir. by Cecil Musk (British Council Films, 1941) <<http://film.britishcouncil.org/queen-cotton>> [accessed 1 July 2012]

<sup>532</sup> *Diary of Raymond Streat*, 1987, p.76

<sup>533</sup> *Queen Cotton*, 1941





Figure 82: Stills from *Queen Cotton*, directed by Cecil Musk (British Council Films, 1941)





Figure 83: (Top) Worth Model  
 Figure 84: (Bottom) On-Screen audience watching fashion parade  
*Queen Cotton* (British Council Films, 1941)

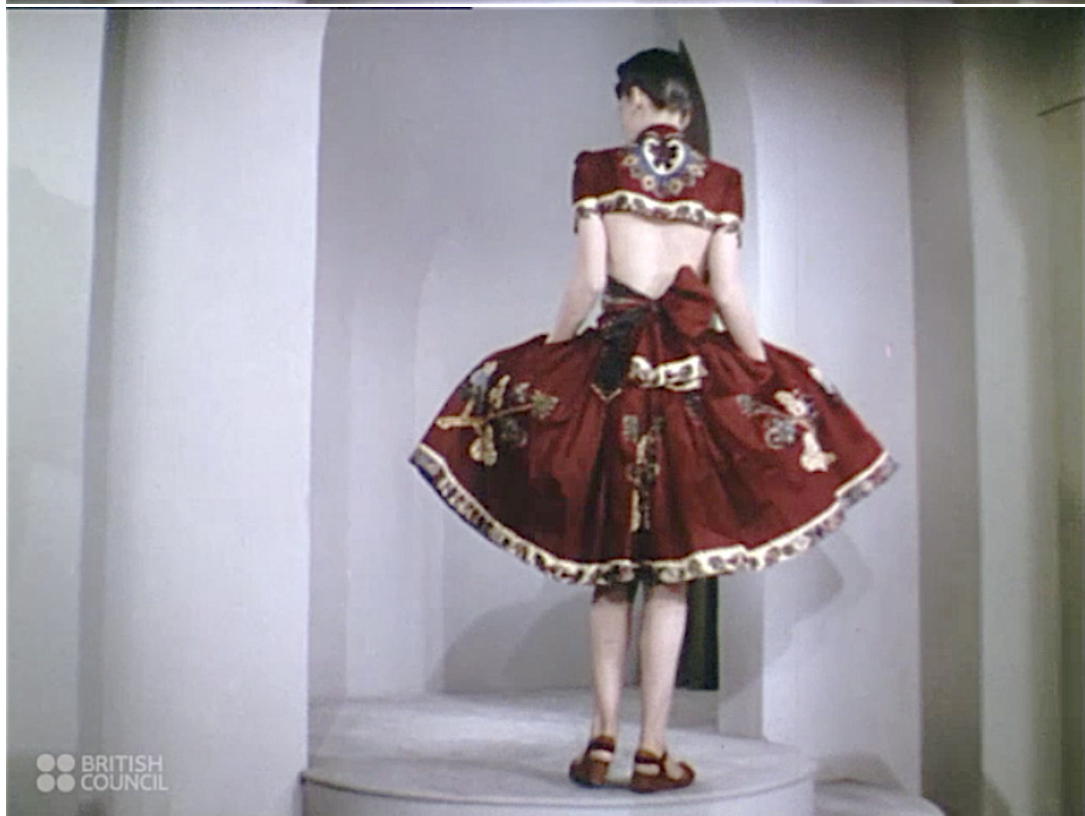


Figure 85: Example of cotton day dress designed specifically for the South American Market, designer unknown, *Queen Cotton* (British Council Films, 1941)



Figure 86: Worth's Garden Frock of Printed Cotton, *Queen Cotton* (British Council Films, 1941)



Figure 87: Design Synchronisation in the inset of the sleeve.  
*Queen Cotton*, dir. by Cecil Musk, (British Council Films,  
 1941)

features, created the dress shown here in Figure 85. With its cut away back, large bow and printed and appliquéd fabric this model is indicative of the strategy to envisage the needs of South American women and therefore extend the couturiers' design range. Figure 86, another full-length dress by Worth, also highlights the speculative nature of many of the models. In its appropriation of the styles associated with the American Civil War of the 1860s, this model made reference to *Gone With The Wind*, the most popular film of 1940.<sup>534</sup> This was a clear sign that Madam Champcommunal (Worth's designer) anticipated that this film's spectacular costumes would have an influence on international fashion. A notable design feature, in both of these models, was the set of the sleeves, which created an exaggerated raised shoulder line. As Figure 87 illustrate this construction technique was evident in many of the models and operated as a clearly defined stipulation for future fashion lines. This design synchronisation was a visual representation of a narrative that underpinned the tour's promotional material. The primary objective was to emphasize London's ability to replace Paris and operate as the arbiter of fashion, not only for tailored garments but also for dressmaking, the 'soft' element of couture production. This goal was made clear in *Vogue's* editorial on the South American showcase, in its blunt claim that; 'they used to dress in Paris, now the women of South America can choose from the London fashion collections specially designed for them'.<sup>535</sup> The collection for South America saw the couturiers finally work with the textile industry and construct a creative industrial network, the importance of the British Colour Council in the realization of this collaborative and unified design process should not be ignored as it illustrates how the conditions of war had finally led to the fulfillment of the Council's and Fashion Group's long-held objectives.

In order to understand the true nature of the Incorporated Society it is now important to explore the specific events that led to its formation. This section will therefore argue that the couturiers were in fact given little choice and that it was the result of a specific political policy that finally forced them into this formal collaboration. The recognition of this is important to understand not only why the Society came into being but also how it came to operate in the post war period. In March 1941, Sir Cecil Weir's introduction to the South American showcase in the special edition of *Harper's Bazaar* declared that this bid to promote London as the World's fashion centre was not

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<sup>534</sup> *Gone With The Wind*, Producer; David O'Selznick, Director; Victor Fleming, Costumes; Walter Plunkett, (Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1939). This film won ten academy awards in 1940. It was one of the first American films produced in Technicolor and was the highest grossing film, a record it held until 1966.

<sup>535</sup> *Vogue*, May 1941

viewed by the government as an isolated and 'splendid example of effective collaboration between dress designers and fabric manufacturers [... but pointed] the way for other exhibitions of a similar character.'<sup>536</sup> Despite this exceptional governmental support, the South American tour was not, as might be expected, the automatic impetus behind the formal construction of the Incorporated Society, although it did define its membership. It was the reasons behind the cancellation of the next collaborative venture, an ill-fated exhibition prepared for North America that finally, after more than two years of war, secured the establishment of this official couture trade group. Consideration of this previously undocumented exhibition can therefore offer a more accurate understanding of the principal objectives behind the creation of the Incorporated Society.

In July 1941, the Ministry of Information began to release details of a New York showcase. Newspapers quickly began to produce features on the preparations being undertaken in the workrooms of Russell, Hartnell, Morton, Mosca (who had recently left Paquin) and Worth.<sup>537</sup> When Amies and Stiebel also became involved, the *Sunday Referee* commended their release from army duties in its article, 'Fashion "Aces" Get Leave – to Design for U.S.' and highlighted the continued support being offered to the couturiers by the government and textile industry.<sup>538</sup> It pointed out that once again the production of the models would be funded by the wool, cotton and rayon textile export groups who contributed £9,000; a three-fold increase over their sponsorship of the South American collection. *Women's Wear Daily* also reported that the Board of Trade would continue to support this 'collaboration of the fabric industry with dress designers' through the supply of raw material and the finance of both the production of original fabrics and a robust publicity campaign.<sup>539</sup> Yet the designers' participation was not as forthcoming or cohesive as the first export showcase. The houses of Molyneux and Paquin chose not to become involved, and those that did decided to show only half their models in the group presentation and follow up with separate exhibitions of their full collections in New York. To a certain extent this may have been because of the commercial objectives of those

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<sup>536</sup> Sir Cecil Weir, 'British Fashions for South America', *Harper's Bazaar*, March 1941, p.27

<sup>537</sup> 'British Design Group to Visit U.S. in October', *Women's Wear Daily*, 10 July 1941. Bianca Mosca left Paquin shortly after completing the designs for the South American showcase. She then set up under her own name at Jacqmar alongside Stiebel.

<sup>538</sup> 'Fashion "Aces" Get Leave – to Design for U.S.', *Sunday Referee*, 17 August 1941. (HAA) This temporary release was secured by the Board of Trade through negotiation with the army authorities. Stiebel was given seven days and Amies a number of free afternoons.

<sup>539</sup> 'British Design Group to Visit U.S. in October', *Women's Wear Daily*, 10 July 1941 (HAA)

couturiers with established trade links in the North American market, yet it also demonstrates the designers' continued unease about participation in joint exhibitions.

In September 1941, after all the models for the New York showings had been completed and were prepared for shipment, the Board of Trade suddenly cancelled the showcase. Reports, across a range of national newspapers were brief and the explanation for this boycott particularly vague. They merely reiterated a Ministry of Information press release that noted that 'the designers and textile groups concerned had agreed that a trade promotion effort into the North American market [would be] untimely'.<sup>540</sup> It could be suggested that the cancellation was because of the competition London designers posed to their American counterparts. In New York in particular, the occupation of Paris in June 1940 had again raised questions about the American fashion industry's reliance on French inspiration and guidance. In July the influential *Tobé Fashion Report* immediately pointed out that manufacturers and retailers across the country needed to 'build up authority for American designers as [...] the real future of American fashion business lies in the creation of American fashion authority'.<sup>541</sup> In response by September 1940, *The New York Times* had proclaimed the 'beginning of an American couture'.<sup>542</sup> By the time of the proposed showcase of London couture, over a year later, the American fashion industry had already made a concerted effort to promote its own designers and to stake New York's claim to design authority. Sandra Stansbury-Buckland's research has shown that through fashion shows, press weeks, advertising credits and design awards, American designers gained 'a celebrity status' not known before the occupation of Paris.<sup>543</sup>

The designs the London couturiers submitted for the second collaborative export showcase provide clear evidence that the sensitivity of American fashion producers had not been taken into account. An examination of a selection of the garments made in cotton for this tour show that the London couturiers continued to extend their range beyond tailoring, their traditional market stronghold, and included many boldly printed

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<sup>540</sup> 'Fashion Show For U.S. Cancelled', *News Chronicle*, 13 September 1941 (HAA)

<sup>541</sup> 'American Designers and the Future of American Fashion', *Tobé Fashion Reports*, 16 July 1940, p. 16. Tobé Coller Davis founded *Tobé Fashion Reports* in 1927, the organisation operated as the reporters and interpreters of the fashion world, publishing weekly newsletters for subscribers across America.

<sup>542</sup> This was in response to the efforts of six Fifth Avenue retailers who held invitation only catwalk shows for American high society. These shows featured eight hundred original custom-made American designs 'in the French tradition'. For details see Victoria Pope, 'True U.S. Couture Emerges in Shows', *The New York Times*, 5 September 1940 (ASA/GB/NNAF/P44076)

<sup>543</sup> Sandra Stansbury Buckland, *Promoting American Fashion 1940 through 1945: From Understudy to Star* (PhD Thesis, Ohio State University, 1996), [http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc\\_num=osu1216235913](http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=osu1216235913)



dresses.<sup>544</sup> For example, Mosca produced the model seen here in Figure 88; its playing card printed cotton fabric by Jacqmar was daring and fun and its novelty plainly catered to a market not at war. To assert his fashion authority, Amies produced a range of idiosyncratic dress designs. These featured low-slung belts, sharply defined waists and wide, loose Magyar armholes to emphasise the hips (Figures 89 & 90). In retrospect Amies pointed out that this speculative and exaggerated styling was not an example of 'good designing [as it was] difficult for anyone to wear, and far too different from the current fashion'.<sup>545</sup> The design of these dresses clearly challenged the protectionism evident in the American fashion industry as they laid claim to the couturiers' fashion authority and the view of London as a creative fashion centre. The promotion of the London dressmakers' fashion authority was therefore antagonistic to the American fashion industry's own aspiration to develop New York's design status.

The American fashion industry's promotion of its own designers was not enough to cause the cancellation of the tour. This decision, as Board of Trade communications demonstrate, was taken not by its ministers but by those of the Foreign Office, and was more in line with broader political objectives that focused on securing American aid. When the *White Paper*, which set out a political agenda to increase export was released in June 1940, the Treasury had hoped to meet import requirements from gold reserves and exports, however by the beginning of 1941, it was clear that this was not feasible.<sup>546</sup> Britain therefore began a series of delicate negotiations with America, to encourage more lenient trade terms, which any external propaganda had to be careful not to jeopardize. So whilst the Board of Trade began to make preparations for a large-scale transatlantic promotional campaign for creative made-to-measure dress, unease began to develop at the Foreign Office. The first indication, that 'to hold a fashion show in New York in November might be harmful to national interests' was included in a letter Anthony Eden (the Foreign Secretary) wrote, in August 1941, to Sir Robert Campbell at the British Embassy in Washington. This asked for his opinions on the viability of the Board's proposed couture showcase.<sup>547</sup> Eden drew on a letter he had received from Raymond Streat and informed Campbell that the main purpose of the tour was for

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<sup>544</sup> When the tour was cancelled the Cotton Board's Colour, Design and Style Centre bought the couturiers' cotton models. These are now in the possession of Platt Hall, Gallery of English Costume in Manchester and were featured in the gallery's 1985 exhibition, previously mentioned in the Introduction, entitled *British Cotton Couture, 1941 – 1961*.

<sup>545</sup> Amies, 1954, p. 84

<sup>546</sup> S. Pollard, *The Development of the British Economy, 1914-1990*, (London: Arnold, 1992), p. 177

<sup>547</sup> Letter from Mr. Eden To Sir R. Campbell, August 30 1941. (Fashion Show for USA 1941, MAF 97/1001)





Figure 88: Bianca Mosca at Jacqmar 1941 Suit.  
The Platt Hall Cotton Board Collection (1957.482)



Figure 89: Hardy Amies dress of Black and white batik cotton, 1941



Figure 90: Hardy Amies dress, *Vogue*, December 1941

'reasons of prestige' and 'to sell models and fabrics'. He also however highlighted the two areas that he believed could be politically problematic: firstly that the exhibition would only consist of 'four or five designers and four business executives' and secondly that 'considerable publicity would be essential to success'.<sup>548</sup> With this concerted publicity campaign due to start in October, Campbell pointed out that America was 'a seller's market for such goods as the United Kingdom can export [which left] little need for exceptional expenditure on promotion and publicity'. He recommended that 'on the contrary selling and marketing expenses should be cut to the minimum to offset higher prices' and also pointed out that 'we [the British] cannot develop new lines without running into criticism'.<sup>549</sup> After consultation with other officials in Washington, Campbell then went further and stipulated that they were all 'unanimous in advising that a Fashion Show on lines proposed should be abandoned [... as it] would be disastrous at this particular time and undo much of his work'.<sup>550</sup> Campbell explained the reasons for this in depth in his assertion that the dress shows:

Would not, I fear, be acceptable in state of public feeling here, and might be assailed with some acrimony. It not only gives opportunities to isolationists for attacks but might also give rise to unfavourable criticism from friendly elements on grounds of British wasteful expenditure on luxury production and addiction to 'business as usual', at a time when American industries and consumers are being exhorted to restrict production and consumption of civilian supplies in order to step up production essential for Britain and national defense. We have been maintaining that we have only one purpose in exporting to the United States, viz. to earn dollars to pay for our essential war expenditure. Officials of the departments of State, Treasury and Commerce with whom I have kept in touch on subject of UK exports [...] have suggested that they might move their ministers to support it [the couture showcase] publicly at an appropriate time possibly when controversy over Lend-Lease materials has been disposed of, and certainly when announcement is made of trade agreement negotiations with the United Kingdom and Dominions. Apart from other objections it would be difficult to prove to the satisfaction of United States authorities, press and public that the lavish expenditure contemplated for this show would bring in a commensurate return in dollar earning exports. The situation, which has developed, calls for a further change in policy as regards exports to the United States.<sup>551</sup>

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<sup>548</sup> Ibid.

<sup>549</sup> Ibid.

<sup>550</sup> Ibid.

<sup>551</sup> Internal Government Letter from Sir R. Campbell to Mr. Eden, 5 September 1941 (MAF 97/1001)

This decision primarily corresponded with a change in stipulations within the Lend-Lease Agreement, which was negotiated in March 1941 to provide unsecured American credit for the British war effort. Lend-Lease finally gave Britain a guaranteed financial support system, which reduced the political urgency of revenue generation. The economic historian Alan Dobson has highlighted the fact that the export drive into South America had led to a 'heightened competition between the United States and Britain and had drawn protests from manufacturers in America'.<sup>552</sup> The New York showcase of London couture was cancelled when the government finally succumbed to American demands that 'Britain agree not to export goods received through or replaced by this Agreement' whether or not these materials were American imports.<sup>553</sup> This placated American exporters 'who struggled to see why they should be deprived of materials if British competitors could then use them to gain an advantage in overseas markets'.<sup>554</sup> The promotion of the couture showcase, due to the competition it posed to the American fashion industry and its reliance on fabrics produced with imported raw materials, was therefore not only politically insensitive but also a contravention of this new proviso in the Agreement.

The introduction of Lend-Lease considerably relaxed the needs of export and allowed the British government a much greater degree of specialisation on war mobilization than would otherwise have been possible.<sup>555</sup> With this financial assistance secured, the government immediately turned its attention to protecting British resources. With the pressures of revenue generation removed, government microeconomics began to implement controls to restrict supply, curb inflation and decrease consumption. A political campaign of central planning to enforce these priorities was swift; this implemented rationing to curtail consumer demand, industrial quotas and the concentration of production in civilian industries into large units, and both the central allocation of scarce resources and manpower budgets to allocate labour.<sup>556</sup> This had a

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<sup>552</sup> Alan P. Dobson, *U.S. Wartime Aid to Britain, 1940 – 46* (London: Croome Helm, 1986), p.16

<sup>553</sup> Brewer, 1997, p. 205. The White Paper agreed that Lend-Lease supplies would not be used in export production, except when complete physical segregation was impossible and that in the future, as in the past, the principle of substitution would apply to similar materials, as well as to lend-lease materials. Also that, for materials such as cotton that were scarce in the United States, restrictions of increased stringency and very precise definition would be enforced upon British exporters. For further details of the implications of the Lend-Lease agreement see Hancock, W. K. & Gowing, M. M., *History of the Second World War: British War Economy* (H.M.S.O. 1st Edition edition, 1949), p. 244

<sup>554</sup> W. K. Hancock and M. M. Gowing, p. 243

<sup>555</sup> Allen, R.G.D., 'Mutual Aid between the US and the British Empire, 1941-45', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 109 (1946), pp. 243-271

<sup>556</sup> P.J. Wiles, 'Pre-war and War-time Controls', in *The British Economy 1945-1950*, edited by G.D.N. Worswick, and P.H. Ady (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952) pp. 125-158. The policy for reducing the

direct impact not only on luxury production but also on all areas of manufacture. In terms of the clothing industry this saw the immediate introduction of the *Civilian Clothing (Restriction) Order*. This limited the amount and type of material and trimmings that manufacturers, dressmakers and tailors could procure and use. The *Clothes Rationing Coupon Scheme*, based on a simple points principle, followed in June 1941, with members of the public each allotted sixty-six coupons annually. Every type of clothing was given a specific coupon value that had to be surrendered at the point of purchase. As an example, this meant that a dress, regardless of quality or price, needed eleven coupons.<sup>557</sup>

These policies, whilst restrictive, were not immediately detrimental to the couturiers' businesses. Digby Morton told Mass Observation that when rationing initially came in he was able to maintain a 'good steady business'. He pointed out, that by not being allowed to purchase a range of goods, customers 'were opting for a better class of things'.<sup>558</sup> Many of his clients were also able to save their coupons for quality items as they had large wardrobes of pre-war clothing in comparison to less wealthy consumers. Morton's claim is supported by the social historian Alexander Calder's examination of government surveys, which demonstrate that those with the money to buy couture had increased their wardrobes during the war, 'possibly as their pre-war garments were of better quality, lasted longer, and could be more easily patched'.<sup>559</sup> *Women's Wear Daily*, by the end of 1941, was therefore able to report to its American readers that:

Two years and more of war has not yet disbanded London's little group of dress designers. Bombs have fallen on Mayfair, and Grosvenor and Bruton Streets look battered, but most of the names that were to the fore

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use of plant and materials in civilian production had three elements. 1). Many industries producing for the domestic civilian market and some producing for export were designated 'controlled industries' and were restricted as to the volume of deliveries they could make to retailers. In some cases, output was prohibited altogether, while in others production was permitted only under license from the Board of Trade. 2). Limitation led logically to concentration. Reduced output of controlled industries meant that many of them were operating part time or with only part of their plant. In order to check inefficient use of resources, the *Concentration of Production Plan* was introduced in March 1941. Originally applied to only 30 industries, the coverage was later broadened to include some 70 industries. It is estimated that these measures closed 3,294 factories by August 1943, and released 260,000 workers and 70 million square feet of floor space for war production, for further information see *British Information Services, Concentration of Consumer Industries and Trade in Britain*, I.D. 279 (December 1943), p. 6). The 'concentration of products', involved stripping production specifications of unnecessary details and reducing the number of grades or types of particular commodities produced. The final development in this branch of industrial regulation was the 'utility product', which consisted of "goods sufficiently clearly defined for their prices to be fixed, designed to meet essential needs in a sensible manner, and produced in the most economic manner possible for further information see British Information Services, "Utility" Production in Britain, I.D. 404 (April 1943) p. 2

<sup>557</sup> *Directorate of Civilian Clothing Functions and Establishment*, 30 July, 1941 (BT64/73)

<sup>558</sup> Morton, MOI, 3 March 1942

<sup>559</sup> Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939 – 45* (London: Pimlico, 1992) p.406

in September '39 are still in business. [...] A forecast that when women could only buy a very few clothes they would buy from better houses has worked out, and most of the dressmakers have names on their books that are new since June 1, the date when rationing commenced.<sup>560</sup>

However three months later (after the government agreed to the Lend Lease export restrictions), when Mass Observation undertook a return visit to Digby Morton's premises it discovered that most of his time was now spent 'writing letters to governmental departments' as he had to 'fight like hell to get anything'.<sup>561</sup> In a matter of months, his workroom staff had been cut by a third to twenty-five, and his business had reduced to the production of 'approximately eight suits a week'.<sup>562</sup> *Women's Wear Daily* quickly reported that even Hartnell and Molyneux, London's largest and most prestigious couture houses, were struggling. It pointed out that Hartnell now employed around one quarter of his pre-war staff and operated on approximately half the number of the previous year.<sup>563</sup> Molyneux was also reported to be 'just ticking along [and only working] on orders for plain un-extravagant garments with a limited staff'.<sup>564</sup> The Lachasse customer account books for the Spring of 1942 show that one of the main occupations of the London couture workrooms was now the 'reconfection' of quality dresses and coats from elaborate pre-war styles into more appropriate wartime clothing.

This depletion of the couture industry was a direct response to the full implementation of the Lend-Lease agreement. This not only put an end to the New York export show, but most importantly, it indirectly led to the enforced withdrawal of the couturiers' workforce and the 'Concentration' of the whole clothing industry. The need for export revenue was replaced with demand for recruits to factories and the Women's Auxiliary Services. This meant that the fashion industry at all levels was suddenly faced with the enforced loss of its female staff. The move to concentrate the industry saw the government retain only those clothing manufacturers who used the most efficient mass production methods and enforced the closure or merger of small firms in order to create larger factories and production runs. By June 1942, these measures had cut the British fashion industry by nearly three quarters. In terms of actual statistics, the 1935 *Census*

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<sup>560</sup> 'Third Year of War Finds London Dress Designers Still Carrying on', *Women's Wear Daily*, 4 November 1941 (HAA)

<sup>561</sup> Morton, MOI, 3 March 1942

<sup>562</sup> Ibid.

<sup>563</sup> 'Third Year of War Finds London Dress Designers Still Carrying On', *Women's Wear Daily*, 4 November 1941 (HAA)

<sup>564</sup> 'London Couture Engaged in "Reconfectioning" Quality Apparel to Remove "Frills"', *Women's Wear Daily*, 28 March 1942 (VSPA/ADD/1994)

*of Production* recorded that there were 2,347 London companies that had more than 10 employees each and employed 126,808 workers. By 1942 a Board of Trade Survey demonstrates that Concentration had now left only 45 establishments, based mainly in the East End of London, that were all much larger, each with more than 200 employees now employing approximately 35,000 workers.

To retain a requisite workforce and supply of raw materials firms had to be designated under an *Essential Works Order*. This could only be obtained if at least 80 percent of output was for export, military or essential civilian production: a stipulation that couture producers could not meet.<sup>565</sup> Essential civilian clothing now had to conform not only to the coupon system but also to *Utility Regulations* that controlled their production, distribution and cost. The Utility scheme was introduced in order to control quality and design within all manufactured products so that the needs of the civilian population were met with the minimum of labour, material, and power. For the clothing industry it prescribed the fabric yardage of each garment and aspects such as the number of buttons, pockets, seams and flaps allowed in their construction.<sup>566</sup>

Creative fashion and luxury production were clearly no longer needed within a fully mobilized economy. Government correspondence from August 1941 illustrates (even when the New York Showcase was yet to be abandoned) that the Department of Overseas Trade found it difficult to get the Ministry of Labour to agree to allow ten couture firms to keep a nucleus of staff.<sup>567</sup> Strassner aside, the ten houses that the Department asked to be preserved had all cooperated on the South American tour: Creed (at Fortnum and Mason), Hartnell, Morton, Paquin, Molyneux, Stiebel, Russell, Lachasse and Worth (which alongside Champcommunal as its head designer also housed the businesses of Amies and Mosca). Only six months earlier an unprecedented level of support had been offered to the couture for the tour now however, the Cabinet viewed this request as politically 'sensitive' and was concerned that in acceding it might be accused of 'bias toward luxury trades and encouraging the expanding black-market'.<sup>568</sup>

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<sup>565</sup> Alan Dobson, 'The Export White Paper, 10<sup>th</sup> September 1941,' *Economic History Review*, 1986, pp. 59 – 76, (63)

<sup>566</sup> For further details of this scheme see, Christopher Sladen, *The Conscription of Fashion: Utility Cloth, Clothing and Footwear, 1941 – 52* (London: Scholar Press, 1995)

<sup>567</sup> Mr Kahn (Board of Trade), letter to Mr. R.M. Gould (Ministry of Labour and National Service), 26 August 1941 (BT64/3579)

<sup>568</sup> Mr. R.M. Gould, letter to Mr. Kahn, 1 September 1941 (BT64/3579)



On the 10<sup>th</sup> November 1941, two months after the cancellation of the New York showcase and as the government's policy towards full mobilisation took effect; Harry Yoxall, the business manager of *Vogue*, drew up the Constitution of the Incorporated Society and on the 6<sup>th</sup> January 1942 it was finally established as an official and permanent body. The fact that the objectives of the Society were set out not by the couturier-members themselves but by an employee of *Vogue* should not be ignored. As with key members of the Fashion Group in the 1930s, such as Alison Settle and Madge Garland who were both editors of this magazine, Yoxall was fully versed in the needs of the promotional culture of modern consumerism, as his work was primarily involved with advertising and marketing and the exertion of control over the fashion industry. When the Society's aims ('objects a – r', set out in Appendix 1, p. 353) are considered in this light, it is clear that they were written not to address the specific needs of the couturiers and the wartime economy but with an eye on the future needs of the broader international fashion industry. The Society was given eighteen objectives, the majority of which (objects g – r) were generic and adhered to the Incorporated Society Act of 1908. These primarily ensured the legality of the association's financial transactions so that in terms of public liability its identity was separate and distinct from its members. The first six objectives (objects a – f) met the legal dictates of the Act, which specified that this form of Society needed a precise set of rules that were open to public scrutiny. It can be argued that it is in these first six objectives that many of the Fashion Group's pre-war aspirations, to regulate design and control demand for consumer goods in the broader fashion industry, became enshrined within the Society's Constitution. For example, this can be seen in its aims to ' (a.) maintain and develop the reputation of London as a creative centre of fashion', '(b.) to collaborate with groups of fabric and other manufacturers and with companies, firms and individuals, with a view to increasing the prestige of British fashions [...] in home and overseas markets' and to '(f.) organise or hold exhibitions of British fashions'.<sup>569</sup>

It should be recognised that an Incorporated Society was a collective form where the ultimate aims were to protect its members' professional standing and eliminate bogus practitioners. This new body sat in the historical traditions of other professional associations primarily formed in Britain between 1880 and 1925, such as; the Incorporated Society of Musicians; the Incorporated Institute of British Decorators and

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<sup>569</sup> *Memorandum and Articles of Association of The Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers*, Registered 6 January 1942. (Board of Trade Records BT64). For full details see Appendix 1.

Interior Designers; the Incorporated Society of British Advertisers or the Incorporated Association of Architects and Surveyors.<sup>570</sup> Geoffrey Millerson's work into the history of these 'qualifying associations' has shown that their ultimate goal was to divide 'the "professionals" from the rest [...] in search of prestige.'<sup>571</sup> The formation of this Incorporated Society set out the boundaries of which businesses produced couture and therefore which were worthy of this professional identity. It gave a specific structure to the London couture industry and qualified its nine members as genuine couturiers, whilst those dressmakers that sat outside its boundaries were discredited. Yet unlike other such qualifying bodies, the repeated reference to 'British fashions' rather than the 'London couture industry', in the first six aims of this new Society, indicate a broader mission clearly formulated to benefit clothing producers and retailers outside its membership. The decision to make it an Incorporated Society for 'fashion designers' rather than for 'couturiers', whilst indicative of the nationalism and egalitarianism of the war years - as couture was a foreign and elitist form of clothing production – should also be seen as representative of the broader aims of the Society's Constitution. Rather than merely provide protection for this form of luxury production and the couturiers' individual businesses it was constructed as part of a network of prestige and design reform for the wider British fashion industry.

Whilst the fact that this new association was created for members of the London couture industry was not made apparent in its name, and in its aims it appeared to address the commercial needs of the broader fashion sector, it can be argued that to a certain extent the decision to become an Incorporated Society, rather than a trade union, export group or chamber of commerce, operated as a vehicle to separate its members from the interests of trade. For as Millerson makes clear, this particular form of professional body 'has comparatively little in common with trade unions, in some ways, they resemble the medieval craft guilds [...] as trade unions represent their members for the purpose of negotiating remuneration and working conditions thus [they are] concerned with economic status'.<sup>572</sup> A key benefit of an incorporated society was that as a not for profit body it sat between the state and the private sector and its identity had civic overtones as a social and professional endeavour rather than a collective created merely for economic gain.

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<sup>570</sup> For a full consideration of these separate professional bodies see Geoffrey Millerson, *The Qualifying Associations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1964)

<sup>571</sup> Millerson, 1964, p.8

<sup>572</sup> Millerson, 1964, p.14

For the couturiers, membership of an Incorporated Society rather than an export group (the form adopted by the textile industry) was a way to avoid status ambiguity and define and delimate their occupation as a specific, and therefore nationally relevant, profession. Having explored the political situation and the impact this was now having on the couturiers' businesses, it can be suggested that of all the aims set out in the Society's Constitution, it is perhaps 'object d', to '[represent] their views to government and trade bodies and the press', that offers the clearest explanation for why they finally agreed to this formal collaboration. Within the war economy the impetus towards collaboration, and assistance of the wider British textile and fashion industry should therefore be recognised as a clear result of business protectionism brought about by wartime mobilisation and the Concentration of the industry. This challenges the understanding that 'during the war the government backed the Society from the outset' as this clearly misrepresents the construction of the Society.<sup>573</sup> The institutional history of London couture and the formation of the Incorporated Society should be understood as a reaction to very inconsistent state intervention and the drastic restrictions on export, labour and materials. This move towards formal collaboration was in fact not a reaction to governmental support but more precisely to the impact of its removal.

### **3:3) A Narrative for the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers: From champions of the export campaign to the civic virtue of the People's War**

For the couturiers the creation of the Incorporated Society was not a choice but a necessity, a strategy to ensure that their businesses survived the conflict. To analyse whether the Society met its stated objectives throughout the rest of the war, is difficult as they were created as an indication of what the couturiers could bring to the British fashion industry if their businesses could be maintained into the post-war market. It is therefore more pertinent to explore the identity that the formation of the Incorporated Society created for this particular form of luxury production and how this supported its continuation. In 1942, the need for a new form of defense for the couturiers' continuance was stimulated by the Lend Lease agreement as it saw the couturiers' relationship with not only the government but also the textile industries unravel. The Cotton Board, for example, had envisioned that the New York models would mark its entry into the dollar market, however these garments were produced in fabrics that could not leave the

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<sup>573</sup> Ehrman, 2004, p.106

country (as the raw material was imported from America) or be sold in Britain (as they were produced for 'export-only'). The only role the clothes could now perform was as the first display in the Colour, Design and Style Centre's exhibition hall when it officially opened in January 1942. This, as *Textile Weekly* pointed out, saw the models presented as 'a shop window to illustrate the possibility of using cotton as a fashion fabric in a really big way in happier times to come'.<sup>574</sup> Minutes of the Incorporated Society's meetings show that its designer-members were ambivalent towards participation in this show as it held little commercial incentive but they cooperated 'as a gesture of good will', only when the Cotton Board agreed to pay them for their work.<sup>575</sup> This 'good will' did not however extend to a similar request by the Wool Export Group to present the woollen models in an 'educative' show to British wholesalers in Bradford.<sup>576</sup> This proposal was rejected and the official reason given was that 'the models were not suitable for the home market'.<sup>577</sup>

This accusation was similarly applicable to the cotton models, however this rebuff corresponded to a loophole in the Lend Lease agreement, as in January 1942, after much negotiation, the Department of Overseas Trade released a list of traditional (and therefore acceptable to Lend-Lease) British exports: these included some apparel, in addition to raw wool, woollen goods and linen. This meant that the wholesale industry could still produce woollen garments for export. The Wool Group's presentation of the New York models was therefore antagonistic towards the couturier's own commercial objectives. More importantly, the Bradford show interfered with some of the couturiers' current negotiations with specific wholesale companies to act as contracted design consultants.<sup>578</sup> Many of the designers, in particular Russell and Morton, now had design contracts with the wholesale industry. For example by 1944, Russell was reported as working 'in factories as much as in Mayfair, evolving the perfect basic patterns to fit every figure type for the mass market'.<sup>579</sup> With the need to retain the cooperation of the Wool Export Group (which gave £1,000 to enable the designers to finance the creation of the Incorporated Society), the designers were persuaded by their vice-presidents and

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<sup>574</sup> 'Colour, Design, and Style Centre', *The Textile Weekly*, 16 January 1942

<sup>575</sup> *MISDM*, 6 January 1942

<sup>576</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>577</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>578</sup> *MISDM*, 21 January 1942

<sup>579</sup> 'Well Known London Dressmakers Still Operate', *Women's Wear Daily*, 11 May 1944 (VSPA/ADD/1942 & HAA)

Chairman to show their models in February 1942.<sup>580</sup> In return the Wool Export Group paid the couturiers £30 for each model along with a pool of coupons for accessories. The models remained the property of the designers so that where possible, after the show, they could be 'adapted and sold to their clients'.<sup>581</sup> Later that month, the woollen models were then displayed in New York.

After this, rather than the more adventurous designs in cotton and rayon, the presentation of London couture in America was limited to traditional woollen day and dinner wear, a typical example of which is seen in Figure 91, an Amies suit produced in conjunction with the Wool Export Board. Sandra Buckland's analysis of American newspaper adverts shows that, from this point in the war onwards, this type of London suit began to receive an increased level of promotion in the transatlantic market.<sup>582</sup> This ensured that the recognition of English couture as essentially tailored wool based garments then became more firmly entrenched in the minds of American consumers. This put an end to the aspiration to present London to the American market as the world's creative fashion centre and wartime replacement for Paris. Instead it allowed the continuation of the narrative (promoted by the Fashion Group of Great Britain in the 1930s) that London was merely a complimentary fashion centre to Paris and that it should still be viewed as the destination for 'hard' tailored couture.

Within the changed economic environment the couturiers had no choice but to agree to any requests presented to them by the government. After the Manchester and Bradford shows that presented the American tour models to British textile manufacturers and wholesale dressmakers, Sir Thomas Barlow (the Director of Civilian Clothing), asked the Society to design a range of outfits that adhered to the Utility Regulations, 'as inspiration

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<sup>580</sup> To facilitate the formation of the Incorporated Society, Thow Munro (Vice president of the National Wool Textile Export Corporation) obtained a grant of £1,000 from its members to enable the designers to start the necessary proceedings for incorporation.

<sup>581</sup> *MISDM*, 21 January 1942

<sup>582</sup> Buckland, 1996, p. 134



Figure 91: Amies Suit designed in August 1941 for the Wool Export Group's New York showcase, February 1942

to the making-up industry'.<sup>583</sup> For the government, the couturiers' participation was not only a service to the nation's manufacturers but more importantly a propaganda exercise to boost acceptance of the Utility scheme. From its inception, the Utility guidelines had met with resistance from manufacturers and consumers. This was heightened by a public relations *faux pas* by Hugh Dalton (Minister of Economic Warfare), when in an interview with the *BBC News*, a month before the scheme became law, he referred to utility dress as 'standard' clothing. Helen Reynold's research has shown this was then often reiterated in the news reports that surrounded the scheme and instigated much debate in government circles about the right way to promote these regulations.<sup>584</sup> The couturier-designed models were therefore proposed as a counter to claims that the standardisation inherent in the Utility restrictions made it impossible to create well-designed or desirable clothes.<sup>585</sup>

Christopher Breward has claimed that it was 'the Society [who] proposed to the government that they design clothing according to Utility regulations.'<sup>586</sup> Analysis of the minutes of the designer's meetings contradicts this assertion, as their involvement was not as self-initiated or uncomplicated as this suggests. All of the couturiers (with the exception of Molyneux) were wary about a scheme that would, without full remuneration, give a competitive edge to the wholesale trade. Mrs. Mortimer (the Director of Worth) highlighted the attitude of the designers to the scheme when she claimed that the proposition was 'potentially dangerous to their business [... and could] prove to be the thin edge of the wedge for the wholesale makers-up to exploit the "haute couture", and [...] might ruin the name of Worth'.<sup>587</sup> It took careful negotiation by the Society's non-designer members to convince them that it would be 'desirable [...] to identify themselves with this National effort'.<sup>588</sup> In light of the deterioration of the role of luxury production within the export campaign all the designers (except Hartnell who had a well-publicised contract with the mass-market producers Berkertex to produce utility models) finally agreed that 'they had no choice' but to demonstrate that they were 'very keen to do everything possible to help in the national emergency [...] and were ready and willing

<sup>583</sup> 'Incorporated Society Delegate Meeting with Sir Thomas Barlow, at the Board of Trade,' 21 January 1942 (AAD/2011/14) For full details of this scheme see Geraldine Howell, *Wartime Fashion: From Haute Couture to Homemade, 1939 – 1945* (Berg, 2012) and Christopher Sladen, *Utility Cloth, Fashion and Footwear, 1942 – 52* (Ashgate, 1995)

<sup>584</sup> Helen Reynolds, 'The Utility Garment: Its Design and the Effect on the Mass-Market 1942-45', in *Utility Reassessed*, edited by Judy Attfield (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 125 – 142, (137)

<sup>585</sup> For complaints lodged against the Utility Regulations see, Reynolds, pp. 125 – 142

<sup>586</sup> Breward, *Fashioning London*, 2004, p.125

<sup>587</sup> *MISDM*, 21 January 1942

<sup>588</sup> *Ibid.*

to collaborate to the full'.<sup>589</sup> The couturiers chose to participate firstly, as it gave them a viable role within the Concentration policy, as it enabled them to show the government that they could offer practical style guidance to manufacturers who had lost their designers and key workers. This engagement with the government therefore portrayed the couturiers' practice as important and beneficial to the whole nation, not just private commerce. Secondly, agreement was secured by the anticipated release of the L85 Regulations in America, which were set to restrict transatlantic clothing production along similar lines to the British Utility scheme. Introduced on 8 March 1942, these American regulations placed restrictions on evening jackets, skirts and dresses, blouses, culottes or skirts, straight coats, fitted coats, jackets and slacks. They prohibited dolman, balloon, leg o'mutton, bias cut sleeves, all-around pleated skirts, wide belts, aprons and tunics and dictated the maximum length of jackets, skirts and dresses. The London couturier participation in the British government's Utility Scheme therefore had a commercial incentive for the designers as it helped to convince American retailers that they had developed a specific expertise that would be relevant to their newly-restricted market.

Thomas Barlow initially only asked the designers to produce sketches for the scheme; however the couturiers claimed these would be 'misleading and practically useless' as the mass market producers would need to see exactly how they looked in material form.<sup>590</sup> They therefore agreed to produce thirty-four models that included blouses, skirts, jackets and dresses. The Treasury then purchased these at thirty guineas each and pattern templates were made cheaply available to the industry. To ensure that participation in the scheme did not damage the couturiers' prestige the Society requested that the models were made outside their own establishments, in the workrooms of specific wholesalers.

Barlow presented the 'Couturier Scheme' (as it was known in the Board of Trade's correspondence) to the designers as a chance for them to act as design reformers, who would create the 'opportunity for the Government to produce garments of such taste and quality as had never before been available to the masses'.<sup>591</sup> This idea was promulgated in the first public relation's exercise undertaken by the designers for the Scheme when, in order to understand how clothing was mass produced, they all attended a demonstration of the production capacity of the Brook Manufacturing

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<sup>589</sup> Ibid. Eight of the designers made garments for the Utility scheme, Hardy Amies, Digby Morton, Bianca Mosca, Peter Russell, Worth, Stiebel, Creed and Molyneux.

<sup>590</sup> *Incorporated Society Delegate Meeting with Sir Thomas Barlow, at the Board of Trade I.C.I House Millbank*, 27 January 1942 (AAD/2011/14)

<sup>591</sup> Ibid.



Company in Northampton. In documenting the event, local reporters were quick to ask these 'famous designers' their reasons for participation in the Utility scheme. In response, Mosca claimed that she and her fellow couturiers were 'going to educate women to dress with simplicity and charm, without expense and with real taste and in a year's time the "average woman" will be a transformed being'.<sup>592</sup> When it presented the scheme to the wholesale trade, the Board of Trade was however careful to avoid accusations of enforced design reform and issued an announcement that stated it 'in no way wanted to adopt the role of fashion dictator'.<sup>593</sup> *The Times* utilised the Board's press release and reassured the trade that the scheme was only concerned with making economies in material and labour resources and had:

No intention of interfering with the "styling" of utility clothes by any manufacturer, provided that he produces clothes which conform to the specifications and are satisfactory in fitting and durability. But it is thought that the specially planned designs of expert couturiers will give a lead to the use of simple and practical models, which will be attractive to those who wear them.<sup>594</sup>

In the seemingly altruistic offer of guidance to mass-manufacture, participation in the Utility Scheme cast the newly formed Incorporated Society as a body of official taste professionals. Within much of the design historical documentation of the Utility scheme, it is this ethical dimension within the design process that has received recognition. In particular, the manner in which many designers seized on the rationalizing agenda of the Utility scheme as an opportunity to instill an appreciation of 'good design' in the general population.<sup>595</sup> Unlike many designers working in other fields such as furniture and ceramics, this agenda did not underpin the couturiers' decision to participate.<sup>596</sup> Despite Mosca's suggestion of a desire towards design reform, the main reason for the designers' compliance with the government was to secure protection for their workforce in line with the concentration of the industry.<sup>597</sup> In November 1939, *Vogue* had declared the war an opportunity 'for all the great merchants of Britain to look to the prophets in

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<sup>592</sup> 'Fashion Experts Come to Northampton For Ideas,' *Northampton Chronicle & Echo*, May 1942 (DMPB)

<sup>593</sup> 'No Wish to Be Fashion Dictator, Says British Board of Trade Issuing Latest Clothing Dictum', *Women's Wear Daily*, 1 June 1942 (ASA/GB/NNAF/P44076)

<sup>594</sup> 'War-Time Clothes for Women: Expert Fashion Designers to Prepare Models', *The Times*, 12 May 1942 (VSPA/ADD/1942)

<sup>595</sup> See for example Attfield, 'Introduction,' *Utility Reassessed*, pp. 1 -10

<sup>596</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2

<sup>597</sup> *Minuets of Couturier Scheme Delegate Meeting*, 27 January 1942 (AAD/2011/14)

their own country for the models that they have heretofore purchased elsewhere'.<sup>598</sup> However, the minutes of the designer's meetings (whilst noticeably self-censored) allow us to understand that this was not a business objective for many of the couturiers. Their production of made-to-measure clothing was founded on social elitism. The couturiers did not see themselves as altruistic proselytisers for the reform of British industrial fashion design and had no urge to inspire their wholesale competitors.

This first attempt at design collaboration between the mass-market manufacturers chosen to produce the prototypes and the couturiers was to prove problematic. The Board of Trade, in interviews with both the designers and the participating wholesalers, found that both parties were swift to criticise each other's design or production methods. The couturiers did however note that Molyneux's working relationship was 'smooth and efficient', Stiebel's coat was done with 'excellent co-operation' and Creed's suit and coat was produced through a 'satisfactory collaboration'.<sup>599</sup> However they also pointed out that Mosca had 'considerable concern' about the cut of both coat and suit and a new maker had to be found and whilst Russell's suit achieved a 'very good cut' by the first maker the second (by an unconnected factory) was not as successful. Similarly, Champcommunal was pleased with her suit, but found the maker-up not as 'style conscious as desirable' and Amies 'struggled to get makers who could find a sense of balance in their production'. Whilst Morton found his suit 'satisfactory', 'members of the fashion trade' informed the Board that the suit, as produced, would not be 'suitable for mass production'.<sup>600</sup>

It was however the couturiers' move away from tailored suits and their design for dresses that caused the most 'hostility from the trade'.<sup>601</sup> The Board of Trade informed the Incorporated Society that it was more than 'a little disappointed' in them. Some designs particularly those by Molyneux and Creed were criticised for the cut and details, which were both considered 'more intricate than the trade desired'. Worth's and Russell's dresses were also accused of needing more yardage than the restrictions and coupons allowed' - an accusation denied by Russell who stated that his dress 'was cut from the yardage and was extremely simple to make'.<sup>602</sup> The production of the utility prototypes placed the couturiers outside their field of expertise and proved a test to their skill as they were exposed to considerably different agendas and working practices. This

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<sup>598</sup> 'Brisk Action on the Mayfair Front', *Vogue*, November 1939

<sup>599</sup> *MISDM*, 8 October 1942

<sup>600</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>601</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>602</sup> *Ibid.*

led the Board of Trade (in its assessment of the Couturier Scheme's production process) to conclude that the venture 'had not proved that a well-established name ensured expert cut and production'.<sup>603</sup>

The Board was also aware of the dangers inherent in the use of the Mayfair designers, which may have resulted in a paradoxical effect and encouraged desire for new clothes. The couturiers' participation was intended not to stimulate but to stabilise the market, the government was therefore wary of any undue promotion, as it had no desire to prompt unnecessary consumption. To counteract this effect, models were sold without distinguishable labels, although retailers were allowed to use window displays and advertisements 'to draw attention to the Mayfair designs'.<sup>604</sup> The care taken to introduce the couturiers' models to the press is made clear by the mannequin parade the Board of Trade organised in September 1942. Analysis of the newspaper images of this event demonstrates that this carefully controlled publicity exercise was not a dress show in the ordinary sense. Much of the glamour and spectacle of a typical fashion display was removed by the government's decision to present the clothes on young women in its employ without accessories or make-up. It is also clear that the Board of Trade used the display as an opportunity to promote a fashion for bare legs, which responded to the current restrictions on the supply of women's stockings. The fact that this was a trade show was also made apparent as the couturiers' original prototypes were shown alongside their industrial copies. This ensured that the Board made consumers clearly aware that the models available to them would be mass-manufactured adaptations. Figure 92 illustrates that there were few distinguishable differences between the original models and the ones adjusted for mass production. The similarity of the couture and mass produced models could easily have lain open the couturiers' design skills to question and had a negative impact on their prestige and claim to creativity. This was counteracted by the reportage in trade magazines such as *Draper's Record* and *Women's Wear Daily*, which were quick to note that the elimination of 'design detail to make production simpler' had stripped certain garments of their 'character and main interest'.<sup>605</sup> At the same time the Board's donation of the couturiers' models to the Victoria and Albert Museum was a clever manoeuvre that ensured the original

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<sup>603</sup> Tom Heron, *Board of Trade Memo*, 6 July 1944 (BT64/3579)

<sup>604</sup> Ibid.

<sup>605</sup> 'Utility By Mayfair Designers ... Trade Adaptations', *Draper's Record*, 26 September 1942, 'Britain's Austerity-Utility Clothes: British Garment Manufacturers Not Impressed with B.O.T. Designs', *Women's Wear Daily*, 13 October 1942, 'Madam will be Well-Dressed by Spring Utility Fashions,' *Daily Sketch*, 23 September 1942 (VSPA/ADD/1994)



Figure 92: Board of Trade Fashion Show to Launch the Couturier designs for the Utility Scheme'

Far Left and Second from Right, original models by the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers, Far Right and Second from Left wholesale models produced from the design templates.

Image taken from, 'Madam will be Well-Dressed by Spring Utility Fashions', *Daily Sketch*, 23 September 1942, p.3

prototypes were immediately recognised as historically significant and the couturiers' contribution an 'important landmark' in the Utility Scheme.<sup>606</sup>

For the Board of Trade the symbolic success achieved by the Couturier Scheme proved to be more important than the practical impact on British manufacture. The sale of the templates achieved only 'moderate success', with in all, only 1,200 sold.<sup>607</sup> Tom Heron, (the Director of Cresta Silks who oversaw the Couturier Scheme) was however able to praise the venture as it challenged trade opposition to the Utility guidelines<sup>608</sup> He also offered the government an informed account of the main factors that led to the trade's mediocre response. This ranged from reasons such as, the 'timing of the scheme', which was introduced at a point when manufacturers were 'more interested in price control than in styling' and a time when they were wary of a 'hidden agenda for further governmental controls', to manufacturers dislike of 'long runs in a limited number of styles' and their disappointment at 'the simplicity of the models, having expected something more sensational'. The most important element behind the manufacturers' rejection of the Couturier Scheme was that the 'trade resented the implication that it was necessary to go outside itself for designing talent'.<sup>609</sup> Contemporary press reports support this last aspect of Heron's summation, for whilst theoretically the scheme appeared unproblematic, many garment manufacturers were reported to be 'as mad as hornets with it in practice'.<sup>610</sup> *Women's Wear Daily* pointed out that many wholesalers dismissed the scheme as 'much ado about nothing' and questioned what the couturiers could offer that the concentrated industry, 'which now constituted the best mass manufacturers in the country', could not.<sup>611</sup> Heron reported that, ironically, this industrial antagonism was in fact beneficial as the Couturier Scheme raised design standards, not through the prototypes created but by its encouragement of 'many of the industry's leading firms to prove that they could do better than the couturiers'.<sup>612</sup>

The designer's participation within the Utility Scheme may have been principally symbolic, and any impact on the mass market limited. It did however position couture production within the populist and collectivist strictures of the People's War (a populist view that class divisions and individual objectives were forgotten as the whole nation

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<sup>606</sup> Reynolds, 1999, p.137

<sup>607</sup> Tom Heron, 6 July 1944

<sup>608</sup> Ibid.

<sup>609</sup> Ibid.

<sup>610</sup> 'Britain's Austerity-Utility Clothes: British Garment Manufacturers Not Impressed with B.O.T Designs,' *Women's Wear Daily*, 13 October 1942 (HAA)

<sup>611</sup> Ibid.

<sup>612</sup> Tom Heron, 6 July 1944

pulled together to defeat the common enemy).<sup>613</sup> For the Board of Trade, the most important aspect of the Couturier Scheme was that it acted as a morale-boosting demonstration of the government's commitment to the concept of 'fair shares'. The Couturier Scheme can therefore be seen as a central component within the political message that the war had seen the nation pull together; what Geoff Ely has described as the government's 'narrative of popular democratic accomplishment'.<sup>614</sup> The Board of Trade, by allowing every British woman access to couturier-designed outfits, had apparently made the unattainable clothing and taste of the elite available for all. The Incorporated Society's elitist form of fashion production was therefore made compatible with what Sonia Rose has called the 'egalitarian morality' of the official discourse of Britain during World War II.<sup>615</sup>

Despite the restrained approach taken in the official mediation of the Couturier Scheme, *Vogue* chose to present the models in a more glamorous and exclusive manner. Its coverage of the utility prototypes, featured fully accessorised mannequins had a distinct emphasis on surface, polish and pose, and retained much of the couture clothing's pre-war sensibility of aspiration (Figure 93). This representation was very different to the government dress parade and challenges the popular understanding that surrounds the Utility scheme: that class divisions were removed. In fashion magazines such as *Vogue* the products of the London couture (despite propaganda and the popular belief that claimed social distinctions were suspended during the war), therefore continued to remain a signifier of class and status. This aligns with Sonia Rose's research that claims that, 'if the [wartime] nation was one people, it was certainly a people who saw themselves differentiated by social class'.<sup>616</sup> *Vogue's* presentation of the Couturier Scheme also corresponds with Martin Francis' analysis of the photographer Cecil Beaton's wartime work which highlights the 'elaborate confection of continuity and change that characterized British culture between 1939 and 1945'. He argues that:

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<sup>613</sup> For a full exploration of the idea see, Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939 – 45* (London: Pimlico, 1992)

<sup>614</sup> Geoff Ely, 'Finding the People's War: Film, British Collective Memory, and World War Two', *American Historical Review*, 105, no. 5 (2001), p. 821

<sup>615</sup> Rose, 2003, p. 31

<sup>616</sup> Rose, 2003, p. 67





Figure 93: Four images from 'Fashionable Intelligence: The London Couture Creates Utility Clothes for the Board of Trade', *Vogue*, October 1942, p.25 -31

For all its collectivist fervor, the People's War imaginary contained space for the production and articulation of alternative aesthetic codes and, by association, for the promotion of anti-collective and anti-populist social values and cultural sensibilities. Beaton did not stand alone in this respect, and similar political and cultural desiderata can be retrieved from a medley of contemporary sites.<sup>617</sup>

Features in fashion magazines operated as such a space, where the plutocratic social system implicit in made-to-measure dress can be seen to have retained a reassuring presence and reveals a complex layering within the collectivist wartime rhetoric. For example, in February 1943, *Vogue* chose a new softly tailored, collarless dress by Amies for a feature that purported to help women adapt to a 'new whirlwind beauty routine'.<sup>618</sup> Whilst the text was a response to wartime needs, the photograph (Figure 94) made no reference to the war and captured the model, in her made-to-measure dress with a leopard skin fur coat casually draped over her arm, leaving for work. Amies' clothes were also used in a *Harper's Bazaar's* feature in November 1943 (Figure 95) in which the models were depicted, as though in a continuation of life before war, on 'an expedition to Constance Spry's to choose posies'. Such examples, taken from many, demonstrate that the production of elite made-to-measure clothes for a class-based society continued to have considerable purchase in the symbolic economy of the war.

The continuation of consumer interest in luxury production and the trappings of elite dress culture is also made clear by *Ship with Wings*, the first feature film collaboratively costumed by the Incorporated Society. Where later wartime films concentrated on collective heroism this example of stiff-upper lip propaganda from Ealing was based on personal redemption. The first forty minutes of the film are set pre-war and take place primarily in nightclubs and drawing rooms of the officer classes. This went on general release in cinemas across Britain at the same time as the government presented the Couturier Scheme to the public.<sup>619</sup> However, this film went into production eighteen months earlier and (as it was conceived as part of the export drive) allowed full scope for the couturiers to present glamorous, desirable day and evening wear (Figure 96). By the time of its release, the attitude to luxury production had completely altered and the film was therefore attacked by a number of critics and intellectuals for its 'lack of

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<sup>617</sup> Martin Francis, 'Cecil Beaton's Romantic Toryism and the Symbolic Economy of Wartime Britain,' *Journal of British Studies*, Volume 45, Issue 1, 2006, pp. 90 – 117, (95-96)

<sup>618</sup> 'Up at 7 ... Out at 8', *Vogue*, February 1943, pp. 18 - 19

<sup>619</sup> *Ship with Wings*, dir. by Sergei Nolbandov (Ealing Studios, 1942)





Figure 94: (Top) Amies Suit, Photographer Lee Miller, 'Up at 7 ... Out at 8', *Vogue*, February 1943

Figure 95: (Bottom) Worth's black moiré taffeta model and Amies' honey coloured light-weight wool model, Photographer Nancy Sandys Walker, *Harper's Bazaar*, November 1943



Figure 96: Film Stills of London Couture Costumes for *Ship with Wings*, directed by Sergei Nolbandov (Ealing Studios, 1942)



Figure 97: The actress Ann Todd in her Molyneux costume for *Ships with Wings*, Photographer Cecil Beaton, 'High Fashion War Films', *Vogue*, September 1941, p. 54

realism'.<sup>620</sup> Despite this, *Ship with Wings* received an overwhelmingly positive reception from both the public and popular press. In a Mass Observation survey it garnered the highest approval rate of any British wartime film, at 80 per cent.<sup>621</sup> In terms of popular reception this positioned it alongside the costume melodramas of the Gainsborough Studio, which the film historian, Pam Cook, in a challenge to the official discourse of egalitarianism and self-restraint, has interpreted as a wartime yearning for hierarchy and expressivity. Such an understanding is discernable in Cecil Beaton's main publicity shot for *Ship with Wings*, seen in Figure 97, of the lead actress Ann Todd, standing in the fire-ravaged *Vogue* studios in her costume by Molyneux. An image such as this offers a clear indication of the continued appeal of an elite culture of dress amidst the destruction and egalitarianism of war.

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In May 1944, after nearly five years of war, when *Women's Wear Daily* examined the position of the London dressmakers it was able to report that there were:

No casualties among the establishments that had been well-known in the American market prior to 1939, although many now operate on so small a scale as to be practically non-existent, but the threads of business are there to be picked up. [...] small collections, six month delay on orders, shared premises, constantly diminishing staffs and the practically non-existence of the seasonal element characterize the private dressmaking trade in London today [...] The Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers is still an active body and has done a lot during the war to smooth out wartime regulations for its members. The society has been instrumental in working up closer collaboration between fabric manufacturers, which will bear fruit in better times.<sup>622</sup>

In comparison to their position in 1939, the war may have depleted the operation and production capacity of the individual couture businesses. However, rather than disappear into obscurity the small London couture houses survived the devastation with an increased level of power and agency. During the war collaboration amongst the

<sup>620</sup> Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It: British Cinema in the Second World War* (I.B Tauris, 2007) p. 317

<sup>621</sup> Tom Harrison, 'Films and the Home Front – the Evaluation of the Effectiveness by Mass-Observation' in *Propaganda, Politics and Film, 1918 - 45*, edited by Nicholas Pronay and D. W. Spring (Macmillan Press, 1982), pp. 234 – 245

<sup>622</sup> 'Well Known London Dressmakers Still Operate', *Women's Wear Daily*, 11 May 1944 (HAA)

separate couture businesses became a prerequisite to survival rather than a choice. To sustain their businesses a small number of London's couturiers used collaborative activity and created the Incorporated Society, to not only navigate the microeconomics of war mobilisation but also to bring the industrial and political narrative that surrounded their practice into line with the ideology of the 'People's War'.

This chapter has demonstrated that, particularly in the national press, this saw the mediation of their design practice move from the pre-war celebration of privilege and creativity to one of national importance and civic virtue. Throughout the sustained period of national emergency it could be expected that luxury fashion would have become ultimately irrelevant as the Incorporated Society's field of production sat in contradiction to the fundamental concept of the People's War. However a complex and extraordinary network of support saw the couturiers emerge in 1945, not as anachronistic elitists, but as a key element of Britain's export campaign and a morale-boosting component of the government's policy of 'fair shares'. The war was therefore a seminal moment for English couture. It created an extraordinary combination of circumstances that allowed the previously impossible objectives of agencies of design reform, such as the Fashion Group and British Colour Council, to be realised. Despite their diminished workforce and output, the members of the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers and their elitist form of fashion production emerged from the People War in a strengthened position in the eyes of not only the British public, but also most importantly government officials and the textile industry.

Ultimately, this chapter has shown that after the British government received the financial support of the Lend Lease Agreement in 1941, the need for exports, and therefore couture production was removed and as a direct response the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers was created to protect its members' businesses within a fully mobilized country. For the couturiers, the Society's main aim was therefore to create an identity that would convince the government to protect this form of luxury production so that in turn it could perform an important role in the nation's post-war reconstruction. The stated aims of this new Society were impossible to achieve in the war-time economy so it is difficult to assess how fully its designer-members believed in these objectives or whether they were written merely as a justification and to fulfill the legal requirements for the formation of an Incorporated Society. After the war, however, these aims (many of which had been formulated by the Fashion Group in the 1930s) took on a political edge of some urgency. It is in the immediate post-war period that this

study can now analyse how the Incorporated Society actually operated and to what extent its members were able to meet the aims prescribed for them in the Society's Constitution.



## London Can Make It: The Post War Reconstruction of a Fashion Centre



It must be admitted that the factors that made Paris the centre of international social life are changed almost beyond recognition, today, therefore we must believe reluctantly but inevitably that it may be some time before the Paris couture will again share in the fashion leadership of the world. Yes we said share, and that's just what we meant for we think that after the war, [...] fashions will emanate from more than one centre. Certainly America will be one. Certainly London will be another. The English designers were just beginning to come into their own at the beginning of this war. The return of Molyneux to London has certainly helped them still more, and if he stays there he will be the nucleus for a London couture, since everyone in the fashion world will go to London for his collection.<sup>623</sup>

In October 1944, when the Parisian couturiers presented their first post-liberation collections, the New York Fashion Group held an important luncheon to debate the future structure of the international fashion industry. At this point, as Mildred Smolze a representative of the influential *Tobé Fashion Reports* made clear, there were doubts over whether 'the French capital could ever recapture its crown and reign once more as the undisputed fashion queen of the world'.<sup>624</sup> Her encouragement for the American Fashion Group members to therefore take every effort to ensure that the New York industry did not 'lose the fashion leadership it has established in the past few years,' captured a protectionist attitude towards the post-war reconstruction of the fashion industry.<sup>625</sup> Throughout the war American ready-to-wear designers, due to concerted industrial and promotional support, had increased their public recognition, and proved to manufacturers and retailers that they could provide them with style guidance without the creative influence of Paris couturiers.<sup>626</sup> At the same time, the creation of the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers under the chairmanship of Edward Molyneux, had given structure to the British couture industry and offered a clear European alternative to Paris. Whilst Smolze voiced her support for the re-establishment of Paris as an important fashion centre, this was immediately tempered by both her assertion that this would be 'some way off' and she asked her audience to divorce themselves from their 'nostalgia for the pre-war situation and look at the cold hard facts' of the economic and cultural position of war-torn Europe.<sup>627</sup> The view of the Tobé organisation was that in the future there would be three main fashion centres, New York,

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<sup>623</sup> Mildred Smolze, Tobé Fashion Report Representative's Speech at the New York Fashion Group Luncheon, 25 October 1944 (FGA Box 75)

<sup>624</sup> Ibid.

<sup>625</sup> Ibid.

<sup>626</sup> Sandra Stansbery Buckland, *Promoting American Fashion 1940 through 1945: From Understudy to Star* (Unpublished PhD Thesis, Ohio State University, 1996)

<sup>627</sup> Smolze, 25 October 1944



London and Paris, each with its own identifiable strengths that would have equal claim to creativity and design authority. As the war drew to a close and whilst their businesses had been seriously reduced by the conflict, the London couturiers, were faced with a clear opportunity to position London as the most important European fashion centre for the American market.

In Britain the members of the Incorporated Society also found themselves in a fortunate position as the need for export revenue and therefore creative design became a political priority. In 1944, British design reform was given state sponsorship through the creation of the Council of Industrial Design, which had a remit 'to promote by all practicable means the improvement of design in the products of British industry'.<sup>628</sup> When he agreed the funding structure of this new Council, Hugh Dalton (the President of the Board of Trade) made specific reference to the problem that had fuelled much of the work of the Fashion Group of Great Britain and Council for Art and Industry in the 1930s: the import of American cotton dresses. He informed the War Cabinet Reconstruction Committee that the post-war prospects of Britain's export trade were dependent not only on industrial efficiency and marketing but also on their design:

Unless we can be ahead of the other fellows in the efficiency (and if possible the novelty) of our designs for machine-made goods, we shall be competing on a price basis pure and simple; and there we may well be at a disadvantage [...]. Something like an industrial revolution has taken place in the United States in the last fifteen years – a revolution of industrial design. It has made many of our exports old-fashioned and less acceptable. [...] On design alone we were threatened pre-war, even in our home dress trade by American importation [...] and after the war things may well be worse, because of the large progress made in other countries (particularly America), while our need to export will be even greater than it was.<sup>629</sup>

The focus of the Council may have been on machine-made products, however this did not negate the role luxury goods could play in design reform. In the immediate post-war period textiles still formed the largest single category of British exports.<sup>630</sup> The couturiers' participation in the 1941 South American tour had qualified their position as 'shop window' for this particular industry. It had also ensured that their ability to promote

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<sup>628</sup> Hugh Dalton, *Extract from the House of Commons Report*, Vol. 406, No. 12, 19 December 1944 (National Archive Kew, CAB 124/513)

<sup>629</sup> Hugh Dalton, *Industrial Design Memorandum by the President of the Board of Trade, for the War Cabinet Reconstruction Committee, Ministerial Committee on Industrial Problems*, 20 June 1944 (CAB 124/513)

<sup>630</sup> Peter Hennessy, *Never Again Britain 1945 – 51* (London: Penguin, 1992) p.380

the prestige and 'eye appeal' of British-made goods abroad had been recognised within government circles.<sup>631</sup> This acknowledgement is illustrated in a previously undocumented letter sent to Hugh Dalton in February 1944, from Lord Woolton (who had chaired the Council of Industry and Art's aforementioned dress subcommittee's report on the British fashion industry in the late 1930s). In it, the newly appointed Minister for Reconstruction, informed the Board of Trade that the future Council of Industrial Design should:

Be concerned with doing all it could to establish London as a centre for women's fashion after the war. If after the fighting is over, Europe is slow in settling down and returning Paris to its position within the dress trade, I believe there will be a great opportunity for making London into such a centre. [... During the war] you have established close contacts with the British designers: I should have thought on the whole, they would welcome the establishment of studios for the development of London's prestige.<sup>632</sup>

Dalton's response was positive and assured the Minister that the new Council would make every effort to 'back the couture, [... and not] let slip the opportunity of making London a centre of fashion after the war'.<sup>633</sup> A fashion centre was an important trade stimulus that focused attention, not only on the garments produced by elite couturiers, but also on the ability of the products of British manufacturers to compete in world markets. In light of this correspondence, which saw the pre-war aspirations of the Fashion Group of Great Britain enter the political agenda of the country's main institution of design reform, it appears that the couturiers' ability to promote London as a fashion centre had become an economic concept with political potency.

As World War II drew to an end the London couturiers in both America and Britain were therefore positioned within a favourable industrial and political climate. The abrupt termination of America's Lend-Lease agreement in August 1945 meant that exports, once again, moved to the top of the government's agenda. The British designers were however up against stiff competition from Paris, particularly as France immediately set out to reconstruct its own position as an independent great power and devoted 36 per cent of its first post-liberation foreign policy budget to cultural

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<sup>631</sup> Paddy Maguire, 'Designs on Reconstruction: British Business, Market Structures and the Role of Design in Post-War Recovery', *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 4. No. 1. (1991) pp. 15-30, (18)

<sup>632</sup> Lord Woolton, letter to Hugh Dalton, 3 February 1944 (BT 64/3579)

<sup>633</sup> Hugh Dalton, letter to Lord Woolton, 21 March 1944 (BT 64/3579)

propaganda.<sup>634</sup> This study has previously demonstrated the role fashion played within cultural propaganda in the interwar period and this French policy was therefore particularly beneficial to the Parisian couture industry. In comparison, having won the war, the British government felt little need to finance cultural propaganda when there were more pressing economic problems.

Britain had emerged from the conflict a bankrupt, debtor nation; it had sold its foreign investments; sacrificed its export trade; and lost its shipping and international insurance industry.<sup>635</sup> The war may have ended, with the declaration of peace in Europe in May 1945, but restrictions, rationing and austerity not only continued but also increased. With the safety net of Lend-Lease money removed, the main economic problem for Britain was how to generate the revenue needed to pay for the imports indispensable to national recovery.<sup>636</sup> The government's reaction was to restrict imports, to control the movement of funds out of sterling and to embark on an export drive. The main concern, as the economist Sir Alec Cairncross points out, was not the balance of payments deficit but the drain of gold and dollars from the country's reserves. This meant that 'in a world of inconvertible currencies' it was not exports per se that were important but their destination: 'if payments were made in sterling, Britain was no further on in finding the means to settle accounts with the United States, her principal supplier [...] it was only too easy to end up with a large export surplus to countries making payment in "soft" currencies and a deficit in "hard" currencies.'<sup>637</sup> Patrick McGuire's work on post-war export demonstrates that for many British manufacturers it was particularly difficult, 'far more so than in markets elsewhere in the world', to expand exports to the highly productive and competitive North American market.<sup>638</sup> The couturier's collaborative shows for American buyers in the 1930s and the 'Britain Delivers the Goods' showcase during the war had however already demonstrated to the Board of Trade the role luxury clothing could play in the promotion of British fashion and textiles to the crucial dollar market. This was duly recognised in a governmental policy change in November 1946, which was implemented specifically to allow the makers of high-level non-utility clothing to increase their export capacity. For these producers the new

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<sup>634</sup> Ruth Emily McMurry and Muna Lee *The Cultural Approach Another Way in International Relations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1947) p.34

<sup>635</sup> Susan Brewer, 1997, p.217

<sup>636</sup> Alec Cairncross, *The British Economy since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995) p. 45

<sup>637</sup> Cairncross, 1995, p. 50. North America was Britain major source of raw materials and foodstuffs, supplying a little over one fifth of British imports in 1938 and nearly one-third in 1946.

<sup>638</sup> For details of the problems encountered by British exporters across many areas of manufacture see, Maguire, 1991, p. 15

regulations extended their fabric and coupon allocations, lifted the policy of a ceiling-price on their profits and granted import licenses (if two thirds were used for export) for high-grade foreign fabric.<sup>639</sup>

The London couturiers were therefore positioned within a particularly positive environment and yet, to a certain extent, the race to become the world's most important fashion centre was ended in February 1947 by the launch of Christian Dior's seminal 'New Look' collection, which re-established the creative power of Paris. This suggests that the London couturiers had 'let slip the opportunity' they were presented with at the end of the war. This chapter will therefore consider the immediate post-war years, with a specific focus on 1946 and 1947, when expectations for the ability of the newly-formed Incorporated Society to position London as the most important world fashion centre were at their highest. To explore the construction of the post war identity of the Incorporated Society it will focus on specific examples of mediation in the national arena, in the form of the couturiers' export shows, and their participation in specific films and the Britain Can Make It exhibition. This allows a consideration of not only how the Society operated but also the extent to which it achieved the objectives set out in its Constitution. The external identity of London couture will then be considered in direct relation to Paris to demonstrate the impact Dior's New Look had on London's identity as a fashion centre.

#### **4:1) What To Be or Not To Be: The Operation of the Incorporated Society as a Professional Association and Export Group in 1946**

Chapter 3 illustrated that the formation of the Incorporated Society, which did not happen until over two years into the war, was the result of specific wartime conditions and that it was not a choice but a necessity for the London couturiers. It is therefore understandable that the minutes of the designers meetings throughout the first year of peace show that the couturiers were reticent about collaboration and the continuation of the Incorporated Society and its dissolution was regularly discussed. To understand the exact nature of the Incorporated Society it is therefore pertinent to explore the factors behind the post-war continuation of this official form of design collaboration. The couturier's ambivalence towards the Society should be seen in terms of the microeconomics of their day-to-day business. The onset of peace positioned them within a seller's market, driven by a pent-up demand for consumer goods of all kinds. 'Business' as Hardy Amies discovered when he returned on leave from the army in

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<sup>639</sup> *Internal Board of Trade Memo*, 7 October 1946 (BT 64/4146)

1945, 'was so good that the workrooms were jammed to capacity'.<sup>640</sup> The increased level of demand for made-to-measure dress, despite the continuation of rationing and coupons, is demonstrated in the Lachasse customer accounts for this period. A typical example, which shows the swift increase in individual consumption, was Countess Gurowska, who spent £40 at Lachasse in 1942, when she initially (alongside many other customers) purchased only hats, and had her suits altered and shortened. Her yearly expenditure at this dress house increased to £158 in 1946, when she began to order new clothes, then to £233 in 1947.<sup>641</sup> A similar increase in demand was reported at all the separate dress houses.<sup>642</sup> This brought about a return to competitive business objectives. In October 1946, however, despite the resignation of Molyneux who returned to Paris, the members voted unanimously to continue to operate within the Incorporated Society's framework.<sup>643</sup> To understand this decision, it must be viewed in the context of the continued instability of supply and demand, which had a serious impact on both the production and consumption of couture.

In terms of economic policy, the war and the immediate post-war years can be seen as a single period, since many controls not only continued but also increased after May 1945. To control inflation, for example, the government implemented one expedient after another; high taxation to take up surplus purchasing power and to balance government expenditure; wage freezes and limitation on dividends; propaganda for increased personal savings and encouragement of the banks to impose restrictions on credit. Such measures, and in particular the deflation of buying power by Purchase Tax at the rate of 22 per cent on each quarter's sales, had serious effects on the whole of the British apparel industry.<sup>644</sup> These political policies made clothes significantly more expensive and although the couturiers found ready demand in the domestic market, the purchasing power of their clients remained highly unstable. Similarly, the couturiers' ability to sustain production continued to be compromised by other government regulations such as import duties; rationing and the coupon system; the limited and

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<sup>640</sup> Hardy Amies, *Just So Far* (London: Collins, 1954) p. 107

<sup>641</sup> 'Customer Record - Mrs Backhouse: Countess Gurowska', *Lachasse Ltd. Ladies dressmakers, milliners and tailors records, ca. 1930 – 1981* (AAD/1989/6)

<sup>642</sup> *MISDM*, 21 October 1946 (AAD/2011/14)

<sup>643</sup> *MISDM*, 21 October 1946 (AAD/2011/14) Although Molyneux relocated to Paris, the London branch of Molyneux remained a member of the Incorporated Society until 1951, under the guidance of Molyneux's sister Kathleen Lumley. The London branch remained in the Society until September 1951 when Molyneux retired due to ill health and Jacqmar took over his workroom.

<sup>644</sup> For details of these measures see the Apparel and Fashion Industry's Association, *Report on the Present Position of the Apparel and Fashion Industry Prepared as a Basis for Guiding its Future Progress, 1950* (BT 94/324)

controlled availability of materials; and a shortage of new and trained workers.<sup>645</sup> Such factors prolonged the members' reliance on the protective framework provided by a specific couture trade association.

Wartime shortages and controls brought the couturiers into unprecedented contact with government departments such as the Board of Trade and Ministry of Supply, which in turn brought the negotiating function of business association to the fore. The economic research of Leonard Tivey and Ernest Wohlgemuth demonstrates that, in the twentieth century, as governments became more important within the economic and social sphere, trade associations grew and increased their influence.<sup>646</sup> This was because they operated as interest groups and fulfilled a political and industrial need for voluntary business organisations that could represent, to successive governments, their members' commercial interests and collective views. Both during and after the war, this 'marked trend' in business organisation became a 'permanent and indispensable feature of modern industrial organisation', which made it necessary for almost every trade to work 'hand-in-glove' with government departments.<sup>647</sup> For the couturiers (who all produced the same type of product and were similarly affected by political policy) membership of the Incorporated Society therefore gave their businesses professional definition and a mouthpiece to present their specific interests to the government.

The structure of the Incorporated Society also allowed the couturiers to collectively deal with matters of common concern, such as recruitment and labour protection. For example, the designers were able to share the costs and time commitments of a recruitment campaign to 'promote the job prospects in their workrooms', which in 1946 was considered; 'the most pressing and important piece of work which the members could perform'.<sup>648</sup> This saw the couturiers all agree to participate in joint lectures and dress parades at 'nearly all of the country's trade and

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<sup>645</sup> *The Apparel and Fashion Industry's Association Report* blamed this on the government policy of 'full employment and the raising of the school leaving age.' The wages the couture houses could offer, which did not have the economies of scale of industrial production, also remained an obstacle to recruitment.

<sup>646</sup> Leonard Tivey and Ernest Wohlgemuth, 'Trade Associations as Interest Groups,' *The Political Quarterly*, Volume 29, Issue 1, January 1958, pp. 59 – 71. Tivey and Wohlgemuth demonstrate that governments became more important within the economic and social sphere as the result of changes in the structure of industry, patterns of international trade, intensification of internal and international competition, the effects of domestic and world-wide slumps and the demands of modern war. Thereby increasing the need for and influence of trade associations.

<sup>647</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>648</sup> *MISDM*, 13 February 1946

elementary schools.<sup>649</sup> In addition, to protect their investments in the training of new recruits, the members also agreed to a 'gentleman's understanding' that ensured 'no bribery of staff from each other'.<sup>650</sup> Throughout the life of the Society this particular rule, as Michael Talboys (a design assistant at Hartnell in the 1950s) pointed out, 'left a strict code of conduct and it worked all the way through, even if you were a junior girl in a workroom, you were virtually owned by that house you worked for'.<sup>651</sup> This continued even when houses closed down as the Society's members quickly employed each other's redundant staff.<sup>652</sup> The Incorporated Society therefore offered a level of business protection and created the space for collective bargaining between both the government and its separate members. In so doing, the continuation of this collaborative framework was, as with many trade associations of the period, 'a matter of plain logic and straightforward economic interest'.<sup>653</sup>

For the government, the most important contribution the Incorporated Society offered was to increase exports. It must therefore be recognised that the identity of the Society was constructed as an export group and that in the later part of the 1940s collaboration was always focused on this economic agenda. However, whilst the couturiers' engagement within the British export campaign may appear self-explanatory, analysis of the minutes of the Incorporated Society provides evidence that this was also undertaken under duress. For example, the Society's designer-members initially considered the development of exports 'a sacrifice' in terms of their 'time and labour,' as the home market was large and growing, their resources were limited, and there remained the distinct possibility that this 'distraction' could leave them at a disadvantage when a competitive buyers' market returned.<sup>654</sup> Talks, in September 1945, saw William Haigh (the Society's wool industry vice-president) forced to cajole the couturiers into an appreciation of the macroeconomics of their position. He recommended that they 'look

<sup>649</sup> At the request of the government the couturiers extended these tours to Northern mill towns to support recruitment into the textile industry. These recruitment drives were not only an immediate post-war event but continued into the 1950s.

<sup>650</sup> *MISDM*, 13 February 1946

<sup>651</sup> Michael Talboys, *National Life Stories/Oral History of British Fashion*, British Library, 2004 (C1046/02)

<sup>652</sup> For example, after Molyneux retired in September 1951, his 'famous tailor' Rossi was swiftly taken on by Hartnell, whilst Stiebel at Jacqmar commandeered three principle saleswomen, one tailor and one fitter each with their entire workroom staff. For further detail see Alison Settle, 'From A Woman's Viewpoint' *The Observer*, 28 January 1951. This practice also supported the creation of new couture members, for example, John Cavanagh set up his new house with many of Molyneux's former staff and when Peter Russell moved to Australia, in 1953, Michael Donnelly took over his staff and premises at Carlos Place.

<sup>653</sup> Tivey and Wohlgemuth, 1958, pp. 59 – 71

<sup>654</sup> *MISDM*, 9 September 1945. For a similar attitude in a wider range of industries see Patrick J. Maguire, Patriotism, Politics and Production, in *Design and Cultural Politics in Post War Britain: The Britain Can Make It Exhibition of 1946*, edited by Patrick J. Maguire and Jonathan M. Woodham (London: Leicester University Press, 1997) p. 37

beyond the current situation' and see the Society's engagement in the export campaign as 'a case of working in the national interest for the future [...] a long-term policy dictated by the economic conditions of the world today, for unless Britain did attain sufficient exports the home trade for any type of luxury good would eventually become non-existent'.<sup>655</sup> Haigh's argument may have been persuasive, however, it was more probable that the couturier's active engagement with the export campaign was prompted by the access it now gave them to luxury foreign fabrics. A focus on the conservation of raw materials and revenue generation saw four-fifths of the country's textiles remain under government allocation and luxury fabrics produced for 'export only'.<sup>656</sup> The Board of Trade's policy change (to guarantee import licenses for high-grade foreign fabric if two thirds were used for export) meant that the only way the couturiers could gain legal access to any high quality fabric for their British clients was to use the one third of foreign material allowed within the new import/export regulations.

The couturiers may have agreed to participate in the export campaign under the banner of the Incorporated Society, yet, despite requests from the Board of Trade, foreign buyers and the fashion press to replicate the joint collections of the pre-war Fashion Group; they steadfastly refused to participate in a centralised showcase at a large hotel.<sup>657</sup> Instead, coordinated over four days from January 1946 onwards, with timings that did not clash and restricted specifically to foreign buyers and the press, the Society presented 'export only' collections from each of its members' individual dress houses. It is telling, that although several of the couturiers also 'considered it desirable' to coordinate the home collections, to bring 'further focus of attention to the Society's members', this idea was vetoed.<sup>658</sup> Collaboration was undertaken not to promote competitors' businesses in the home market but was aimed only at the export market. It can be argued that the instigation of the Society's twice-yearly export shows, rather than a mutually supportive network of competitors, should be viewed as an appeal for support from the government and textile industry and therefore an example of business-preservation.

For six months of the year, at the expense of their home market, all the members of the Incorporated Society turned their workrooms over to export production. In so doing, the designers received not only orders from foreign buyers but also a boost to

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<sup>655</sup> *MISDM*, 9 September 1945

<sup>656</sup> Cairncross, 1995, p. 70. This continued until 1948 when Britain received Marshall Aid. Clothes rationing and the Utility Scheme also continued beyond this until 1949 and 1952 respectively.

<sup>657</sup> *MISDM*, 12 December 1946

<sup>658</sup> *MISDM*, 1 April 1947



their reputations. Press reports once again positioned them as important ‘ambassadors’ for the export campaign: ‘their success,’ in the words of *Woman’s Journal* was also ‘the nation’s success’.<sup>659</sup> This continued the wartime narrative that the Incorporated Society was not an example of individual commercialism but an altruistic component of the British economy. The type of imagery disseminated by the couturiers supported this view. Figure 98, the press release image of the dress rehearsal of Stiebel’s first export collection of ‘Non-Austerity Fashion for Foreign Buyers’, demonstrates this by its inclusion of the workroom staff. Their worried expressions and clear personal investment in the collection counteracted the lavishness of the model on display. This was an image sensitive to political austerity where, to use Sheryl Kroen’s words, ‘one sees the continued insistence upon the importance of the worker and the dignity of labour in the post-war social order’.<sup>660</sup> The couture dress no longer represented an elite frivolity, but instead, the livelihoods of not only this female audience but also of the nation as a whole. This type of image therefore ensured that couture production was recognised not as a capitalist venture but as a social commitment to the nation’s economic agenda.

The reports of the first export collection also supported this narrative, for example, *Women’s Wear Daily* informed its transatlantic readers that in the presentation of ‘the fruits of their versatile minds to potential buyers from all over the world [...] London’s celebrated haute couturiers have made a magnificent effort to assist the country in her year of need.’<sup>661</sup> British *Vogue* went further and presented them as the lone saviours of the British fashion industry, in its declaration that it was ‘largely due to the members of the Society that we owe the fact that London, while fighting for her very existence, has kept its high place in the fashion world.’<sup>662</sup> An assertion that was surely galling not only to those couturiers who were not members but also to the rest of the ‘concentrated’ fashion industry who had also sustained production throughout the war and been culled to the most efficient and productive manufacturers. The couturier’s commitment to export therefore continued the wartime understanding that the production of elite made-to-measure clothing was beneficial to the nation, which in turn elevated the

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<sup>659</sup> Elsa Shelley, ‘British Fashions Wish Them Luck’, *Women’s Journal*, May 1946 (HAA)

<sup>660</sup> Sheryl Kroen, ‘Negotiations with the American Way,’ in *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives: Historical Trajectories, Transnational Exchanges*, edited by John Brewer and Frank Trentmen (Oxford: New York: Berg, 2006) pp. 251 – 278 (269)

<sup>661</sup> “Haute Couturiers” Magnificent Effort in Country’s Year of Need’, *Women’s Wear Daily*, 7 August 1947 (DMPB)

<sup>662</sup> *Vogue*, February 1946



Figure 98: Non-Austerity Fashion for Foreign Buyers: Dress rehearsal for Victor Stiebel's first Export Collection, watched by Jacqmar's workroom employees, January 1946

industrial and social standing of the Incorporated Society's members. These reports also demonstrate how the Society could operate as a vehicle of exclusion as it allowed the construction of a narrative whereby those who were members were the professionals who had saved the industry, whilst those who were not held little power or agency.

Co-operation with direct business rivals clearly had its advantages as it brought a greater measure of stability to couture production, a far more attractive option than unfettered competition. It also, as promotion became a joint venture, ensured a level of control over the identity of the London couture industry. For example, to inaugurate the start of the January 1946 collections and take control of its publicity, the Society organised a press conference at Norman Hartnell's dress house and for three weeks rented a room at Claridge's hotel to entertain buyers and supply members of the press with promotional material. The press images of the conference show a body of professional designers who appear on the friendliest of terms. Yet commercial rivalry was not eradicated (Figures 99 & 100). It can therefore be concluded that for its members, the Incorporated Society had a strictly limited and defined purpose; as a trade association it gave each member professional recognition; as an interest-group it made the views of its members known to the government; and as an export group it extended the couturiers' market and encouraged support from the government and textile industry.

To understand the post-war design identity of the Incorporated Society it is useful to trace the development of the narrative of London as the centre of hard couture. This had been constructed within the Fashion Group's pre-war shows for American buyers and had been consolidated during the war by the stipulations of the Lend Lease Agreement, which allowed only woollen goods to be imported into this market. This national character was an important component within market differentiation and in 1946 gave the London couturiers an advantage over their French rivals. In January 1946, the export collections extended the couturiers' market, as an estimated sixty foreign buyers attended them; from America, Scandinavia, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Turkey, Iraq, Egypt, Australia, Canada, Bermuda and China.<sup>663</sup> Sales were reported as 'healthy', except to the all-important American dollar market.<sup>664</sup> In April, Hardy Amies used his two-

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<sup>663</sup> 'Week of Fashion Parades', *Birmingham Post*, 4 February 1946 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>664</sup> *MISDM*, 20 February 1946

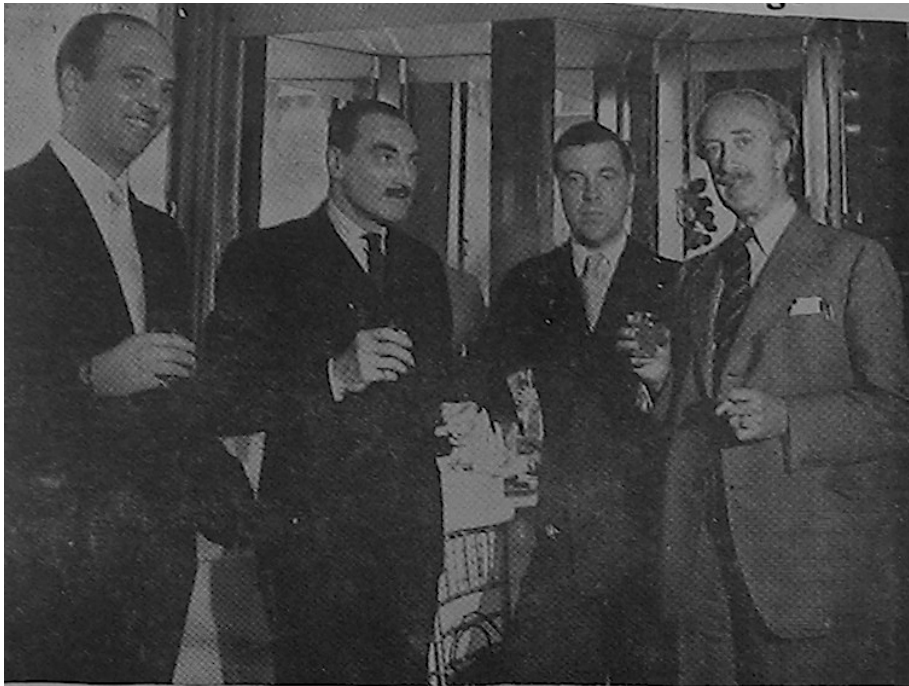


Figure 99: (Top) 'Preliminary to London Openings, From left to right: Creed, Russell and Hartnell with William Haigh of the National Wool Textile Export Corporation at the Incorporated Society's press conference, prior to the London openings for overseas buyers. *Women's Wear Daily*, 5 August 1946

Figure 100: (Bottom) Hartnell addresses the press at Incorporated Society Fashion Conference.  
Left to right - Stiebel, Delanghe, Hartnell, Haigh, Amies, Mrs Mortimer of Worth, Creed and Mosca, *Textile Bulletin*, August 1946

week tour of a number of large American department stores to determine why. That the young designer found the tour extremely encouraging is demonstrated in both Amies' enthusiastic scrap book documentation of every press report and meeting and the optimistic report he produced for his fellow couturiers, on the nascent capacity of the American market, (Figure 101).<sup>665</sup> He found that sales to this market had been slow in January because 'buyers had restricted budgets and were instructed "to examine the market"; to go slow until they found out just what sort of clothes we were producing' and 'what they want is our tailored suits'.<sup>666</sup>

Amies' report can be condensed to three key factors that he claimed would give London couturiers an advantageous market position when the buyers returned. Firstly, he found that American consumers were currently 'British minded'. This commercial expediency was also acknowledged in the British Council's 1945 report, *The Case for Cultural Publicity*, which found transatlantic attitudes to Britain were 'at an all time high [...and the country whilst] possessing only limited means in the political and economic fields of living up to its newly acquire reputation [...was] enjoying enormous prestige and popularity, due to the nation's conduct during the war'.<sup>667</sup> Amies' second observation was that American protectionism had dissipated, and that 'the campaign that certain sections of the fashion press, stores and garment manufacturers waged during the war against buying in Europe, is definitely admitted to be a complete failure [...] Yet there remains a very slight anti-French feeling which together with the slightly higher price of Paris models, swings the market into London's favour'.<sup>668</sup> The lukewarm response to the Paris collections of 1946, expressed in some sections of the American daily press, provides evidence of this anti-French attitude. For instance, in March, *The New York Times* (which played a crucial role in the promotion of American designers throughout the war)

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<sup>665</sup> Amies' American visit was undertaken between 30 April and 16 May 1946. The fifteen-day trip was taken at the request of Marshall Field's department store and overseen by the American Marketing Corporation (AMC). He toured New York, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Detroit and Boston.

<sup>666</sup> Hardy Amies, *Report on the American Market*, Presented at an informal Meeting of the Incorporated Society, 29 May 1946 (AAD/2011/14)

<sup>667</sup> Montagu-Pollock (Head of British Council Cultural Relations Department), *The Case for Cultural Publicity*, 30 May 1945 (FO924/114 LC2134/19)

<sup>668</sup> Amies, 29 May 1946



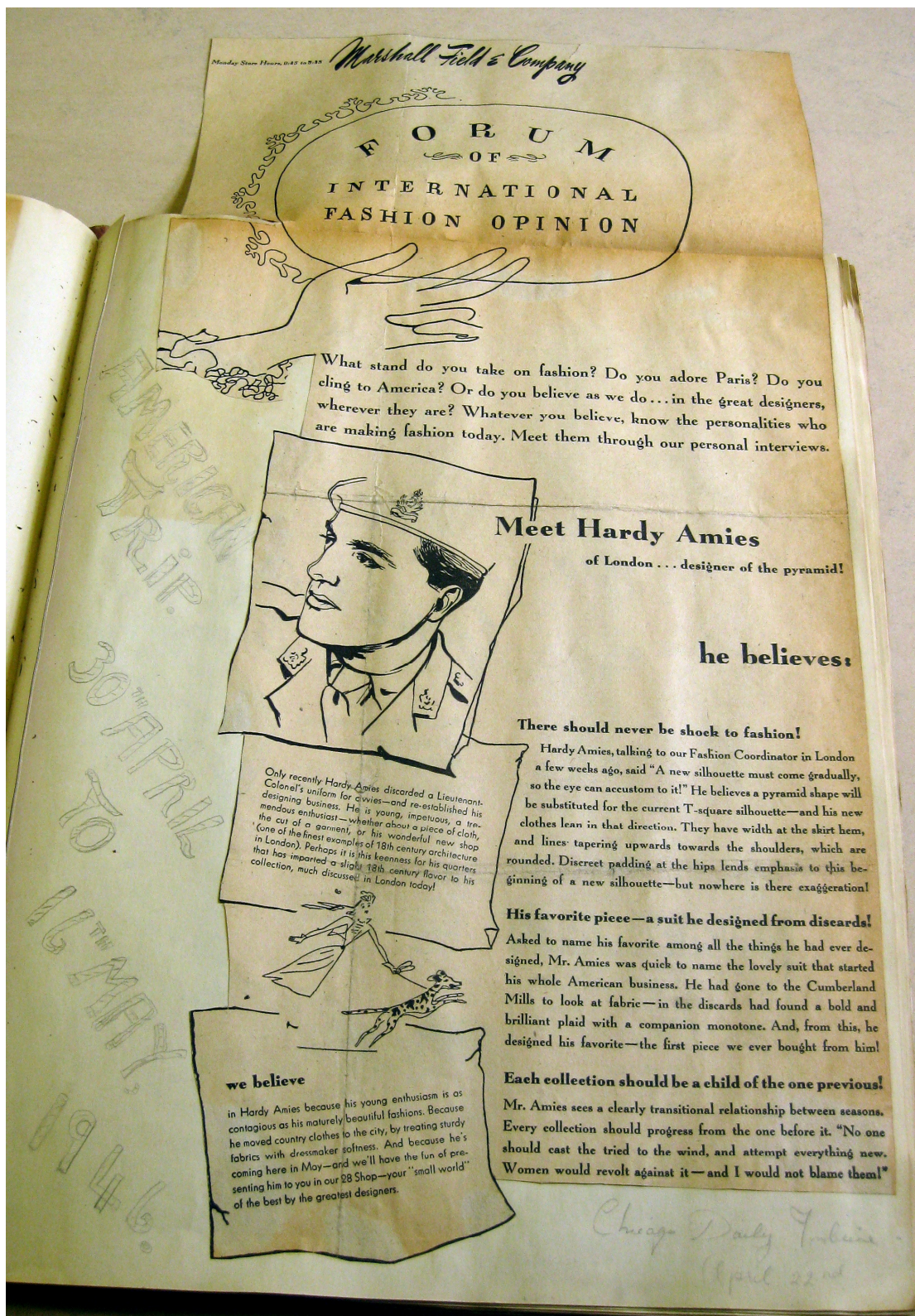


Figure 101: A page from Hardy Amies' scrapbook on his American department store tour 30 April – 16 May 1946

even questioned the prestige of French couture and claimed that its high cost had deterred 'smart' Parisians, so it was bought by vulgar 'black market' clients and was now 'branded as a sign of bad taste'.<sup>669</sup> This newspaper also provided a damning estimation that for the American consumer the French couturiers were 'too flamboyant, presented little that was new and showed no design unity or leading trends'.<sup>670</sup>

Amies' third point, in support of London models, was that they were seen as 'more in tune with American taste'.<sup>671</sup> The 'flamboyance' of Parisian models meant they were 'of course a wonderful source of inspiration'; but in comparison to their British counterparts, they had to be adapted rather than sold as originals.<sup>672</sup> The couturier found that the scarcity of high quality clothes meant that certain American retailers were currently able to sell his original models at a profit rather than use them as prototypes for cheaper in-house copies.<sup>673</sup> This claim is verified in a Marshall Field of Chicago advert for an imported tweed dress and jacket outfit by Amies, which shows this 'original' retailed at \$700: nearly double its original cost price.<sup>674</sup> Amies' report on the market potential of London couture in America could therefore conclude that its unique selling point was its 'reputation for designs that were restrained and wearable'.<sup>675</sup>

In many British and American newspaper and magazine reports there was an accusation that whilst under occupation the French capital had lost its ability to produce clothing appropriate for the American market. For example, the idea that French designers had 'lost touch with reality through wartime isolation' dominated both the text and images of an article Alison Settle wrote for *Picture Post* under the heading 'London Can It Become A World Fashion Centre'.<sup>676</sup> The clothing, from the Paris house of Alix (Figure 102), with its elaborate mutton-chop sleeves, abundant use of fabric and exaggerated millinery, was chosen to illustrate French 'lavishness out of keeping with

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<sup>669</sup> 'Fashion Shows in Paris Will Be Opened Today', *The New York Times*, 26 February 1945 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>670</sup> 'Schiaparelli Emphasises Color in Fashions Draped Print Dresses Feature Paris Show', *The New York Times*, 16 March 1946 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>671</sup> Amies, 29 May 1946

<sup>672</sup> Ibid.

<sup>673</sup> The predominance of this practice was highlighted in an article in *Women's Wear Daily*, which also highlighted the commercial viability of London originals, see 'WWD Foresees British Styles Taking Hold in America', *Women's Wear Daily*, 12 June 1946. Hardy Amies also declared at a press conference in July 1946, 'there was a ready market for the London couture product in America with day suits made by London couturiers selling for more than they cost in the home market' see 'London Fashion Parade Week', *Daily Telegraph*, 26 July 1946

<sup>674</sup> *Women's Wear Daily*, 12 June 1946 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>675</sup> Amies, 29 May 1946

<sup>676</sup> Alison Settle, 'London Can it Become a World Fashion Centre,' *Picture Post*, 6 September 1945





Figure 102: House of Alix collection July 1945, Alison Settle, 'London Can it Become a World Fashion Centre,' *Picture Post*, 6 September 1945



the spirit of the day'.<sup>677</sup> In contrast, the dinner dresses and coats of the 'London style designers' were described as 'anxious to eliminate the dressy Christmas-tree-with-everything-on-it type of dress and to foster the classical lines of fine tailoring'.<sup>678</sup> In comparison to a French mannequin who was positioned at leisure in front of a gilt mirror, her London counterpart (Figure 103) was shown in a demure position, in an almost funereal setting. The photographs of the British mannequins were also careful to present their clothes as a product; either in the process of fitting or with the mannequin handling export fabrics. In the London designers' rejection of ornament and exaggeration there was a clear message: British clothes were not for conspicuous consumption but were practical, patriotic (as they did not waste materials) and in moral alignment with the straitened world situation. Settle also described the London couturiers not as 'fashion' but 'style' designers, a subtle shift, which positioned the concept of 'style' within a discourse of universality, simplicity and functionality. In 1946, Settle therefore used the notion of style to indicate the appropriate, restrained and authentic taste of British fashion in comparison to the extravagant constructed fashions presented in Paris.

This narrative was also taken up in American press reports, where the Incorporated Society's models were often congratulated for their ability to modify the 'exaggerated silhouette' of the Paris collections for 'more practical and easy wear'.<sup>679</sup> In 1946, the L85 regulations (America's war time scheme to restrict the materials and styles used in clothing production) were still in operation. Fashion journalists, producers and promoters could therefore claim that in comparison to Paris, London and New York had both evolved austerity styles that adhered to similar cultural and social objectives.<sup>680</sup>

Throughout 1946, the importance of London's practical tailoring in the American market is demonstrated in the prestige fashion shows given by many of the country's large department stores. In October, for instance, a comparison of the show programmes of both the American department store B. Altman's and Amies' private view in London, provide evidence that the New York store opened its couture show with every

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<sup>677</sup> Ibid.

<sup>678</sup> Ibid.

<sup>679</sup> Melita Spraggs, 'English Collections are much more Elaborate but are still suitable for Practical Wear', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 2 February 1946 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>680</sup> For further examination of this idea see Becky E. Conekin, 'Lee Miller: Model, Photographer and War Correspondent in Vogue, 1927 – 1953,' *Fashion Theory*, Volume 10, Issue 1/2, Berg, 2006, pp. 97 – 125 (106)



Figure 103: Images of London Collections for July 1945, Alison Settle, 'London Can it Become a World Fashion Centre,' *Picture Post* 6 September 1945  
 (Top) Mosca Dinner Dress (Bottom Left) Molyneux dinner dress (Bottom Right) Russell Coat

one of the twelve suits Amies had produced for his second eponymous London collection.<sup>681</sup> These tailored garments constituted a third of the couture models the store had bought in Europe. For the second part of the show, it had purchased thirteen-day dresses, three evening gowns, and five suits from a range of Parisian couturiers. The fourteen outfits in the final section, which were mainly evening gowns, were from another newcomer, the French couturier Pierre Balmain.<sup>682</sup> The store's sponsorship of Amies and Balmain was an obvious promotion of new talent, yet the styles chosen also supported Amies' recent claim in a radio broadcast for the *BBC Home Service* that there was now a 'London school of fashion as distinct from a Paris school [...and] the two centres barely conflict, because the sort of things we make best are based on our tailoring, whereas, the sort of thing Paris makes best are based on their dressmaking'.<sup>683</sup>

In recognition of the clothes that would be most applicable to American consumers, much of the press coverage received by the Altman show, focused on the tailored daywear. Figure 104, of the garments chosen for *Women's Wear Daily's* report, gives a clear indication of the discernable difference between Amies' practical London style and the Parisian exaggeration of Balmain and Balenciaga. Amies' suit may have had 'finely detailed pockets', yet it was austere in comparison to Balenciaga's extended jacket with 'pocket interest' and long back-pleated skirt and Balmain's 'novel' gabardine coat in lavender, with umbrella case built into the belt, and gloves that unbuttoned to free the hands, cut into the sleeves.<sup>684</sup> In this instance, London and Paris were presented as equal but also very different fashion centres.

In 1946, due to the continuation of restrictions, American and British dress culture was presented as comparable. Tailored styles and a rejection of exaggeration gave many of the London couturiers not only the moral high ground but also an appropriate aesthetic for the American market.<sup>685</sup> The narrative, that had evolved in the Fashion Group of Great Britain in the 1930s, of London as the centre of hard, tailored and practical couture and Paris of soft, novel, feminine dressmaking gave the English

<sup>681</sup> *Hardy Amies, Autumn and Winter Collection Programme*, 1946 (House of Amies Archive, 12 Savile Row). This was the whole of Amies' suit collection as his *Programme* of July 1946 demonstrates that he presented twelve suits, thirteen day dresses and six dinner dresses.

<sup>682</sup> Programme of B. Altman & Co, Fifth Avenue, New York Couture Showing, 2 October 1946. In terms of dresses they bought two from Piguet, one from Lanvin, two from Fath, one from Schiaparelli, three from Patou, two from Lelong, two from Balenciaga and two from Molyneux. Evening gowns were also supplied, one from Patou and two from Lelong, Suits were supplemented by two from Molyneux, one from Schiaparelli and one from Balenciaga.

<sup>683</sup> Hardy Amies, 'Fashion and Beauty, The Art of Good Dressing', *Radio Broadcast for the BBC Home Service*, London 13 June 1946, 4:00 – 4:15 (BBC Written Archive)

<sup>684</sup> 'Altman's Presents "International Fashions," *Women's Wear Daily*, 14 May 1946 (HAA)

<sup>685</sup> Virginia Pope, 'Twelve English Models Go On View Here', *The New York Times*, 2 October 1946 (HAA)

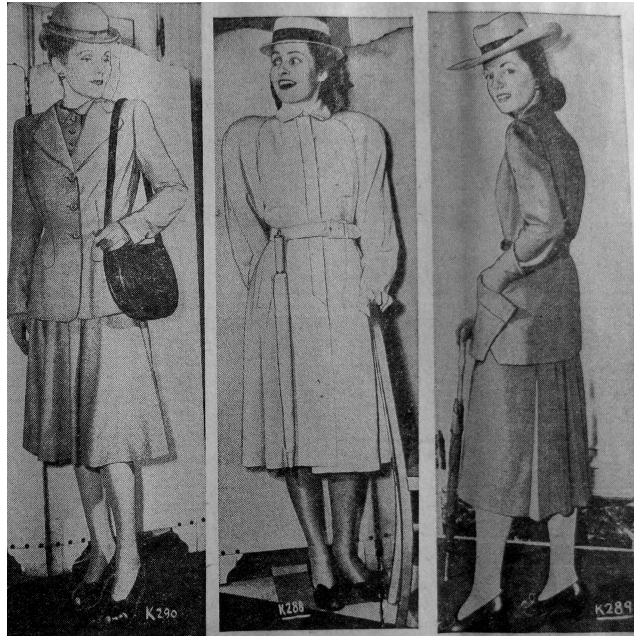


Figure 104:  
 (Top) *Women's Wear Daily's* images of the Altman show. Right to Left Daywear by Amies, Balmain, Balenciaga  
 (Bottom) Hardy Amies and Grey Suit from B. Altman's display of European and American couture

couturiers a commercial advantage. With America, a seller's market for restrained tailored clothing, it was therefore, despite the economic situation and the restrictions placed on production, an opportune time for the members of the Incorporated Society to become a key component of the British export agenda and make London an important fashion centre for transatlantic buyers.

#### **4:2) A Question of Taste and Fashion Fantasy: Design for restraint and future prosperity**

The containment of London's identity as a fashion centre as the destination for hard couture may have been particularly appropriate for the immediate post war period, yet in 1946, just as it had in the Fashion Group in the 1930s, it led to disagreement amongst the designer-members of the Incorporated Society. Edward Molyneux, for instance, believed that the Society's main aspiration should be to 'develop the prestige of London's Tailor-mades and Sports-clothes in wool, cotton and rayon [...as it] would never supersede Paris in dressmaking; the "soft" end of couture production'.<sup>686</sup> While the most vehement opponent to this identity was unsurprisingly Norman Hartnell, who argued that before the war American buyers always took a 'big percentage of his day and evening dresses [and would] continue to do so'.<sup>687</sup> The January export collections demonstrate that by 1946, the separate design agendas of the Society's members had not been synchronised to support the singular narrative of London as the fashion centre of hard couture. The garments shown by Molyneux and Hartnell can demonstrate this, for example, a series of simple tailored suits of brilliantly coloured tweed and a range of sports dresses constituted Molyneux's collection. The dresses and blouses were all in crepe and printed in designs by the couturier that featured traditional English sporting images of horse-riders and golfers.<sup>688</sup> The garments' construction was kept simple, whilst the buttons in the shape of hearts, horses heads and even poached eggs allowed a reserved element of novelty.<sup>689</sup> The collection focused on 'impeccable cut and fastidious attention to detail', whilst the fabric's prints made the clothes immediately

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<sup>686</sup> Notes of Meeting between the Board of Trade Representatives and Captain Molyneux, 4 December 1942 (AAD/2011/14)

<sup>687</sup> Ibid.

<sup>688</sup> Eileen Ashcroft, 'London, 1946, Brings Back Crinolines and the Wasp Waist', *Transatlantic Daily Mail*, 13 February 1946 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>689</sup> Henry Morgans in Montreal and Filenes in Boston bought this entire collection, both Stores presented it with Amies' full collection.

recognisable as English and the buttons made them 'amusing'.<sup>690</sup> In comparison to Molyneux's 'restrained' collection Hartnell's was reported to be 'dramatic, even theatrical'.<sup>691</sup> He included a handful of suits but the majority of his collection reinstated his pre-war dressmaking and focused on eveningwear, which featured wasp waists, exaggerated crinolines, lavish beadwork, sequins and velvet evening coats trimmed with cock feathers.<sup>692</sup>

Molyneux's London collection could adhere to a contained vision of English clothing production, as he was preparing to reopen his Paris dress salon. In comparison, Hartnell's projection of a national design identity created a wider definition for the creative scope of the London couture house. The idea of London as the centre of 'hard' couture, propagated most specifically by Molyneux, Creed, Amies and Morton fitted with a particular vision of British dress culture in the aftermath of war. However, Hartnell's international recognition as dressmaker to the female members of the royal family gave credibility to more spectacular dressmaking. The styles and names of Hartnell's models, such as 'Cinderella' (Figure 105) a sequin covered crinoline, and 'Brazilia' (Figure 106) a lavishly embroidered crepe dress, which had a floor-length cloak with epaulets covered in beads, 'some as big as the Crown Jewels', pointed to a reinstatement of extravagance and opulent display. At a time of austerity, Hartnell's 'Cinderella' proclaimed that London couture 'would go to the Ball' and, as he immediately undertook a tour of South American department stores, his 'Brazilia' presented a glamorous challenge to Parisian dressmaking in that particular export market.

In 1946, the Incorporated Society's January export shows may have rejected the idea of a coordinated presentation of only practical suits and knitwear, however the separate collections were carefully organised to give an overall narrative structure. The 'key-note' of the first day of showings at Morton and Molyneux, were 'eminently wearable,' 'tailored' and 'British'.<sup>693</sup> The collections then became steadily more 'soft' and flamboyant, so that on the fourth and final day they focused on the elaborate crinoline evening gowns at Hartnell and Worth. There may not have been agreement on the type of clothes the designers should present to the foreign buyers, however a sense of design unity was created through the development of a new, softer, and rounded silhouette.

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<sup>690</sup> Joyce Mather, 'Fashion Displays By Molyneux and Digby Morton', *Yorkshire Post*, 1 August 1946 (DMPB)

<sup>691</sup> Jane Austin, 'Joyful British Dresses Are Shown to the World', *The Recorder*, 2 February 1946, p. 5 (HAA)

<sup>692</sup> 'London Fashion Shows', *The Times*, 6 February 1946 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>693</sup> Mather, 1946



Figure 105: (Top) Hartnell's January 1946 Export Collection, 'Cinderella'  
 Figure 106: (Bottom) Hartnell's January 1946 Export Collection, 'Brazilia'



Accordingly, all the designers removed the sharp slim-line silhouette of the war years. Suits by Stiebel and Hartnell, for example, had similar rounded lapels, and focused on curves rather than angularity (Figure 107). To create a rounded figure, Amies padded the hips of coats and jackets with horsehair, Russell (Figure 108) used innovative pleating and Champcommunal at Worth introduced laced-up corsets to ensure the emphasis on the waist. Whilst no export data survives on the sale of these clothes, press reports suggest that the attendant buyers and journalists appreciated this coherent approach to a new, more feminine fashion silhouette, which in turn brought verification to London's ability to generate new and internationally relevant fashions.<sup>694</sup>

The juxtaposition of the elaborate dressmaking practices of Hartnell and Worth, and the tailored aesthetic of Amies, Morton, Creed and Molyneux shows there was clearly space in the export collections for both opulence and restraint within the narrative that surrounded the Incorporated Society. The films *A Question of Taste* and *Fashion Fantasy*, which were both, produced in 1946 and featured Amies and Hartnell demonstrate that this dichotomy also had a place within the London couturiers' mediation in Britain.<sup>695</sup> At a time of austerity and political egalitarianism, these films offer a fascinating site to explore the conjunction between the restrictions placed on post-war consumer culture and desire for luxury fashion. They shed light on the representational position of the London couture industry in Britain and allow a consideration of how this form of design adapted to the political discourse and socialist manifesto of the new Labour government. It also demonstrates the interconnected nature of the different levels of the fashion market with couturiers presented as tastemakers for all levels of the mass market.

*A Question of Taste* was produced by the Scottish Committee of the Council of Industrial Design (CoID) and Pathé Documentary Unit and used Hardy Amies as an authoritative and didactic tastemaker. This film was essentially instructional and not made for general release but for distribution in British secondary schools. It sat firmly within the Council of Industrial Design's agenda to modify and control consumption. The

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<sup>694</sup> See for example, 'Non-Austerity Fashion: World Buyers at London Shows', *Yorkshire Post*, 29 January 1946, 'The London Shows – Couture', *The Draper's Record*, March 1946, Victoria Chappelle, 'London Fashion Trends', *Johannesburg Star*, May 1946 and Gordon Beckles, 'These Men Have a Flair', *Strand Magazine*, June 1946 (VSPA/AAD/1194)

<sup>695</sup> *A Question of Taste*, Scottish Committee of the Council of Industrial Design and Pathé Documentary Unit 1946 (Design Council Archive Brighton) *Fashion Fantasy*, Director - Richard Grey, Condor Film Productions, 1946. BFI Films

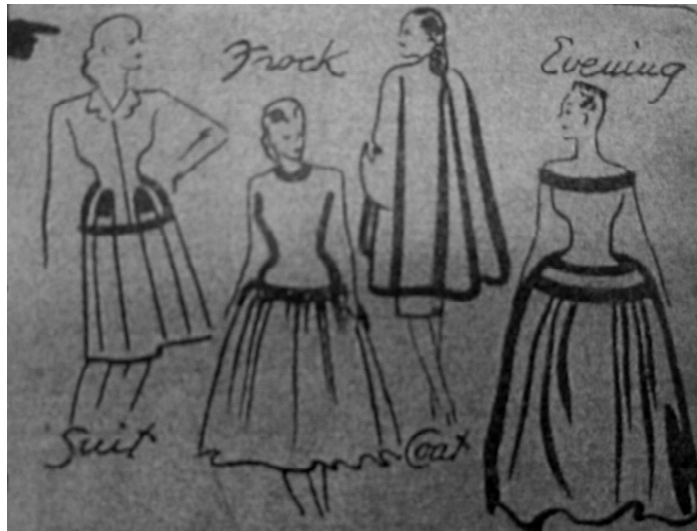


Figure 107: Rounded Silhouette promoted at the Incorporated Society January Export Collections

(Top Left) Stiebel suit, Jacqmar Press Photograph

(Top Right) Press Drawing of suit by Stiebel for 'Sloping Shoulders Return', *Daily Telegraph*, 29 January 1946

(Bottom Left) Hartnell 'Air Pocket' day dress



Rounded Silhouette of the Incorporated Society January 1946 Export Collections

Figure 108: (Top) Russell day dress with draping to create rounded hips. Photographer Cecil Beaton

Figure 109: (Bottom) Anne Edwards, 'Ex-Army Men Show the World New Fashion Line: Buyers see our secret models' *Daily Express*, 29 January 1946, Sketched by Robb

film paradoxically uses a dress designer to encourage young women of 'modest means' to reject fashion and 'the variety of clothes', which the commentary claimed were 'considerable, even in these days of shortage!'<sup>696</sup> The press release for *A Question of Taste* states that it was created to give 'correct pointers' to the female 'school leaver' who 'when free to exercise her right to choose what she is to wear, all too often, throws authority to the winds, as she is inclined to select garments that are unsuitable, or uneconomical'.<sup>697</sup> In a continuation of the role the couturiers had adopted for the Utility Scheme (where they provided paternalistic guidance, so that consumers could achieve style through restraint) the Council used Amies to provide these authoritative 'pointers'. The film follows 'Brenda' in her choice of an 'off-the-peg wardrobe for work and play'.<sup>698</sup> Amies, as a 'leading fashion house expert who has devoted years to matters of dress', both features in the film and delivers the scripted commentary to reveal that the 'real secret to being well-dressed [...] is just a question of taste' (Figure 110).<sup>699</sup> In line with the nationally altruistic discourse that accompanied the Incorporated Society's export shows he states that whilst 'my colleagues and I do not specialise in dress for the young, we are anxious to do all we can to help'.<sup>700</sup> To improve the aesthetic judgments of young female consumers, Amies then instructs the film's audience to 'try to acquire a sense of taste', through the choice of a 'few simple things' that 'fit' (Figure 111). And warns 'Brenda' and all young women, not 'to fall for something because it is glamorous or the latest fashion'. This advice, and idea of taste as representative of control and restraint highlights the moralistic and paternalistic outlook of the CoID, which advocated a consumerism of protection, control and guidance rather than one of individual choice. This attitude aligned with the political ideology of the new Labour government, which as Mathew Hilton shows, 'supported the productive, rational, Utility-scheme purchasing consumer, but shied away from advocating the rights of the people to novelty, fashion and mass-market comfort'.<sup>701</sup>

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<sup>696</sup> Scripted Commentary, *A Question of Taste*, 1946

<sup>697</sup> 'Clothes for Teen-age Girl', *Weekly Scotsman*, 6 November 1947 (Design Council Archive, Brighton)

<sup>698</sup> The CoID Board members agreed that *Question of Taste* was extremely good although doubts were expressed about the clothes worn by the girl, which were seen to be 'not very suitable for her age'. *Report by the Director to the thirty-fourth meeting of the Council of Industrial Design*, 14 November 1947 (Design Council Archive Brighton)

<sup>699</sup> Scripted Commentary, *A Question of Taste*, 1946

<sup>700</sup> Ibid.

<sup>701</sup> Mathew Hilton, *Consumerism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) p. 163. The government's moralisation of consumption was evidenced within the tax structure, where Utility goods were exempted from the purchase tax.



Figure 110: Hardy Amies, presenter and wardrobe of taste.  
*A Question of Taste*, Scottish Committee of the Council of Industrial Design and Pathé  
Documentary Unit 1946





Figure 111: 'Brenda's' choice of wardrobe, and her 'fraction' too short coat.  
*A Question of Taste*, Scottish Committee of the Council of Industrial Design and  
 Pathé Documentary Unit 1946

One of the most interesting moments in the film's commentary, in terms of the couturiers' position within the discourse of post-war consumption, is when Amies discusses Brenda's choice of coat, and asserts that 'of course personally I think it would look better still if it was just a fraction longer, but there again I don't want you to go chasing after the latest fashions'. The rest of the film negates his role as a fashion designer and adheres to a design reform agenda wary of the stimulation of consumer desires. In this context, the comment on the coat can appear subversive, whilst for the 'school-leaver' it can appear patronising. Yet it points to the contradictions that surrounded the British mediation of the London couturiers in the 1940s. Within the politics of consumption, where there was a commitment to price control and the 'fair shares' of commodities, there was a moral distinction between luxury and necessity and between fashion and utility.<sup>702</sup> This was, however, only applicable to the British consumer. The secret to national recovery was economic efficiency based on a combination of restrained domestic consumption and increased production for export. Amies' fashion conscious sensibility was important to ensure that British products could seduce foreign consumers and thereby increase export quotas. His personal opinion on fashion and the 'school leavers' abstinence from fashionable consumption should therefore be seen as mutually compatible components with the country's economic reconstruction.

A similar impetus can be seen to underpin Norman Hartnell's contribution to the film *Fashion Fantasy*, which focuses on a de-mobilised Wren (a Member of the Women's Royal Navy Service) who falls asleep and dreams of becoming a fashion mannequin (Figure 112).<sup>703</sup> After the Wren's preparation at a modelling school, the film moves to Hartnell's salon where she participates in a short presentation of his January export collection. Here as the commentator points out 'hunters of non-utility glamour arrive in

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<sup>702</sup> For a discussion of the attitude to luxury and necessity see Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls and Consumption 1939 – 1955* (Oxford University Press, 2002). This was a continuation of the debate that surrounded the condemnation of luxury, which had raged since the eighteenth century and was strongly gendered as 'female vice'. For further detail see *Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe, 1650 – 1850*, edited by Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford (Manchester University Press, 1999) also *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, edited by Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (Palgrave 2007) and Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge University Press, 1994)

<sup>703</sup> The use of a Wren is important, for as Antonia Lant points out the Women's Royal Navy Service had 'an upper class aura.' *Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Cinema* (Princeton: New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1991) p.202 also see J. B. Priestley, *British Women Go to War* (London: Collins, 1944) p.49. This upper-class aura would have made her future employment as a Mayfair fashion mannequin more plausible.





Figure 112: *Fashion Fantasy*, Condor Film Productions 1946  
(Top) Wren falling asleep to dream of employment as a Hartnell mannequin  
(Bottom) Wren pursuing her dream in Mayfair



Figure 113: *Fashion Fantasy* 'hunters of non-utility glamour arrive in style to see all the lovely things you can't buy, only look at'



Figure 114: *Fashion Fantasy* Hartnell Fashion Parade.  
 (Top) 'Comment Unnecessary' Evening dress  
 (Bottom) The Wren presents a lamé dinner dress in Hartnell's Bruton Street dress house

style to see all the lovely things you can't buy, only look at' (Figure 113).<sup>704</sup> The design of the clothes may have promoted the continuation of an elaborate dress culture, but this was only for foreign consumption. Instead of a provocation, to a viewing public whose lives were shaped by austerity and shortages, this display of elaborate couture was made acceptable not only by its role within the export agenda but also by its supposed inaccessibility to all British women irrespective of class or wealth. *Fashion Fantasy* may also have operated in a similar manner to escapist films of this period, which Richard Dyer points out provided 'a much-needed utopian fantasy in opposition to everyday deprivations'.<sup>705</sup> To a certain extent, Hartnell's contribution to the film provided a panacea for the female consumer that offered reassurance that the restriction of material goods was universal throughout the nation, whilst it also fulfilled a psychological need for luxury, spectacle and escape. If the film's display of exclusive fashion invited its British viewer to imagine herself as a consumer, it was apparently as a consumer who accepted 'continued austerity in order to ensure the healthy recovery of the economy'.<sup>706</sup> This fitted with the British government's ideology, which held up abstinence from consumption as the path to future prosperity for all.<sup>707</sup> Public compliance with this political philosophy was not however uncomplicated or universally accepted. This is demonstrated in Zweiniger-Bargielowska's *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls and Consumption 1939 - 1955*, which effectively destabilises the myth of a blitz-spirited country, where individual grievance disappeared and austerity measures were altruistically embraced for the good of the nation.<sup>708</sup> This comprehensive summary of the effects on the British consumer of the system of controls introduced by the government, shows that the idea of universal sacrifice was more complex and that 'grumbling' and dissatisfaction was widespread especially amongst women who bore the brunt of the persistent shortages.<sup>709</sup> Although this was a crucial period of austerity it was therefore overshadowed by the anticipation of future affluence.<sup>710</sup>

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<sup>704</sup> Commentary for *Fashion Fantasy*, 1946

<sup>705</sup> Richard Dyer, 'Entertainment and Utopia', in B. Nicholls, *Movies and methods: Volume II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) pp. 220 – 232

<sup>706</sup> Kroen, 2006, p. 266

<sup>707</sup> Labour Party, *Let Us Face the Future* (London 1945) p.2. For further discussion of the basics of Labour Party ideology see, Martin Francis, *Ideas and Politics under Labour 1945 – 1951: Building a New Britain* (Manchester University Press, 1997)

<sup>708</sup> Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls and Consumption 1939 – 1955* (Oxford University Press, 2002)

<sup>709</sup> Ibid. pp. 79 - 96

<sup>710</sup> This was an expectation that any political party was unwise to ignore. It is Zweiniger-Bargielowska's contention that a key element within the Conservative party's return to office in 1951 (as its policy of market liberalisation was equated with a return to unrestrained consumerism) was the thwarted consumer desire for

*Fashion Fantasy*, whilst aligned with the propaganda for consumer abstinence clearly addressed the female viewers' constrained desire for material goods and expectation for future prosperity. 'Perhaps the dream will come true one day,' the last line of *Fashion Fantasy*'s commentary spoken as the Wren wakes up, opens the film to this interpretation.<sup>711</sup> This ending suggests that, for an audience who continued to live within the economic restraints of post-war Britain, whilst couture production sat outside the experience of everyday egalitarian consumption, it could exist without antagonism, as propaganda for the fulfillment of hope for future material plenitude. In this context, the utilisation of Hartnell's export collection was a pertinent choice for the film, as throughout the war this couturier had produced an eponymous range of utility garments for the mass-market producer Berkertex. It was therefore a credible prospect that in the future his designs would once again be available not only for the royal family and the wealthiest members of society but also for consumers at all market levels. In 1946, films such as *A Question of Taste* and *Fashion Fantasy* gave the London couturiers a level of agency within the consumer practices and aspirations of many British women. Both also demonstrate the inherent contradictions within the domestic identity of the Incorporated Society, which allowed freedom for both the articulation of egalitarian restraint and anti-collective consumer sensibilities.<sup>712</sup>

The appeal to future affluence and the London couturier's dichotomy as restrained tastemakers and producers of glamorous luxury was also made apparent at the main design event of 1946: The Britain Can Make It (BCMI) exhibition. This was conceived not as a trade show in the traditional sense, but as the organisers of the

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material goods. I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Exploring the Gender Gap: The Conservative Party and Women's Vote, 1945 – 1964', in *The Conservatives and British Society, 1880 – 1990*, edited by M. Francis and I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996) and 'Rationing, Austerity and the Conservative Party After 1945', *Historical Journal*, 37:1 (1994), pp. 173 - 197

<sup>711</sup> Commentary to *Fashion Fantasy*, 1946

<sup>712</sup> This understanding is indebted to recent historical analysis, which can be seen as part of the third phase within the post-war history of British national identity and character during the Second World War. The first phase was underpinned by the idea of the post war consensus and the 'People's War' and 'People's Peace'. The second phase came in the 1970s and 1980s and can be seen in work such as Correlli Barnett's *The Audit of War: The Illusion and Reality of Britain as a Great Nation* (McMillan, 1986) and Patrick Wright's *On Living In An Old Country* (Verso Books, 1985) pp. 83 – 87, where the idea of the People's War was situated as a conservative myth, not as a falsified narrative but in the sense that it had sustained an aura of nostalgia and complacency. The third phase that began in the 1990s seen in work such as Zweiniger-Bargielowska's *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls and Consumption 1939 – 1955* (Oxford University Press, 2002) Pam Cook's *Fashioning the Nation: Costume and Identity in British Cinema* and Sonya Rose *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain* have rediscovered the subversive elements of the national character unleashed by war, ones that triggered subsequent anti-establishment, feminist and multicultural rebellions. An influential essay was also Josephine Dolan's, 'Post-war Englishness: Maytime in Mayfair, utopian visions and consumer culture British film and English hegemony' in *Englishness: Diversity, Differences & Identity*, edited by Christopher Hart (Midrash Publishing, 2008)

exhibition made clear in its *Notes for Guidance to Selectors* 'as a vehicle for the education of manufacturers and the public in the aesthetics of "good design" [... and] first and foremost a prestige show [...] to let the world know that British industry is busy recreating goods of taste and modern design'.<sup>713</sup> In contravention of the Board of Trade's direction that 'no "precious" stuff' be included at this event, and that it all be '*manufactured* goods – not hand made', the made-to-measure dressmakers contributed one fifth of the exhibition's fashion display.<sup>714</sup> This event at the Victoria and Albert Museum, organised by the newly established Council of Industrial Design, forms a dominant part of the documentation of British design in the immediate post-war period.<sup>715</sup> Yet the role of fashion, which occupied one-quarter of its floor space, has not been acknowledged.<sup>716</sup> To a certain extent this can be explained by the glamorous and commercial nature of the female fashion display, which points to an ambiguous relationship between the protagonists of design reform and this gendered design practice.

The couture display, which consisted primarily of eveningwear, was presented on a revolving fabric-draped carousel, accessorized with feathered peacocks, bouquets of flowers and rococo stands. This, as Figure 115 illustrates, was a particularly abundant, *mise-en-scène* of visual fancy that conformed to a traditional concept of the material culture of femininity. This aesthetic was singled out for condemnation by Raymond Mortimer (Editor of centre-left political magazine *New Statesman and Nation*) who proclaimed 'the large revolving affair looks as if it had escaped from a Hollywood "musical": not only is it clumsy in its effort to be rococo, but it stifles the clothes it is supposed to display'.<sup>717</sup> James Gardner (the chief designer of the BCMI) may have claimed that a lot of the exhibition's 'décor – was all Barnum and Bailey [... and] made

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<sup>713</sup> *Notes for Guidance to Selectors* (ID/352/14A)

<sup>714</sup> *Summer Exhibition 1946*, note from Stafford Cripps, Board of Trade to C.S. Leslie ColID, 10 August 1945. (ID/312) Women's garments numbered 127 in the exhibition, the made-to-measure dressmakers contributed 28: mainly evening, dinner, debutante and cocktail dress. The *Wholesale Model Houses* provided 61 Garments mainly daywear.

<sup>715</sup> See for example, *Did Britain Make It? British Design in Context 1946 – 86*, edited by Penny Sparke (Design Council, 1986) and *Design and Cultural Politics in Post-war Britain: The Britain Can Make It Exhibition of 1946*, edited by Jonathan M. Woodham and Patrick J. Maguire (London: Leicester University Press, 1997)

<sup>716</sup> For example Woodham and Maguire (1997), does not refer to the dress section at all except in a brief reference when discussing the textile exhibits. Although Sparke (1986) includes an essay by Anne Gardner on Fashion retailing, this does not mention the fashion exhibit at BCMI.

<sup>717</sup> Raymond Mortimer, 'Britain Can Make It!' *New Statesman & Nation*, 28 September 1946, p. 220





Figure 115: (Top)  
Revolving couture carousel display at the Britain Can Make It Exhibition, Victoria & Albert Museum, September 1946  
Figure 116: (Bottom) Ashley Havinden's design for the Menswear Section of the Britain Can Make It Exhibition



him a name for being a rather airy-fairy designer'.<sup>718</sup> Yet the main impression of the displays and settings, recounted by Jonathan Woodham, is that overall they were 'often imaginative and witty, and widely praised [...] structured in a logical and informative manner [...] from the organisational experience and techniques developed in wartime propaganda'.<sup>719</sup> The overall design of BCMI was therefore defined in masculine terms and the theatrical, feminine aesthetic language of the couture display stood in stark contrast.<sup>720</sup>

Ashley Havinden's menswear exhibit (Figure 116), in its adherence to a modern approach to commercial display, inspired by aesthetic developments in graphic design and photography, is representative of the preferred aesthetic of the CoID.<sup>721</sup> In comparison, the womenswear section, with its couture carousel and the wholesale model houses' 'Hyde Park' and 'Palladian Terrace' sets, was made incongruous by its adoption of the more traditional techniques of shop window display (Figure 117).<sup>722</sup> This turn to feminine commercial culture, sat in contradiction to the aspirations of the British design reform movement.<sup>723</sup> Penny Sparke, in her work on the sexual politics of taste has highlighted the fact that since the nineteenth-century design discourse developed a 'condemnation of feminine culture', with the 'most vociferous attacks directed at the role of fashion, novelty and display'. She has shown that the CoID's concept of 'good design' (which informed the design and selection process for BCMI) drew on the ideological framework of modernism, which was constructed through a language of masculinity. Sparke explores how the 'British design reform movement, excluded feminine taste from its self-definition through the formulation of a hierarchical, binary system of terms and concepts: thus "private" was contrasted with, and valued less than, "public"; "fashionableness" with "universal values"; "surface ornamentation" with "minimal

<sup>718</sup> 'Giles Velarde interviews James Gardner' in Sparke, 1986, pp. 9 – 19 (11) also see James Gardner, *The ARTful Designer* (British Library, 1993) pp. 127 – 143

<sup>719</sup> Jonathan M. Woodham, 'Design Promotion 1946 And After', in Sparke, 1986, pp.23 – 38(25)

<sup>720</sup> Penny Sparke, *As Long As Its Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste* (London: California, Pandora/ Harper Collins Publishers, 1995) p.105 & p.222

<sup>721</sup> For work on the development of 'aesthetically pure' retail practices that drew on the practices of modernist graphic design, see Jeremy Aynsley, *A Century of Graphic Design* (Barron's Educational Series, 2001) and Paul Jobling and David Crowley, *Graphic Design: Reproduction and Representation since 1800* (Manchester University Press, 1996) In particular see 'Chapter 5, Between Utopianism and Commerce Modernist Graphic Design.' For the influence of graphic design on the work of Ashley Havinden see, Micheal Havinden, *Advertising and the Artist – Ashley Havinden* (National Galleries of Scotland, 1999)

<sup>722</sup> Although the theatre designer Oliver Messel was the original choice to create three fashion sets for the Women's clothing display 'country, evening (ballroom and restaurant) and possibly a London Street' the display section of the fashion court was given over to the exhibition designer James Bailey. *MISDM*, 28 March 1946

<sup>723</sup> Sparke, 1995, p. IX



Figure 117: *Britain Can Make It* display  
 (Top) Hyde Park set for wholesale model house daywear  
 (Bottom) Palladian Terrace set for wholesale model houses eveningwear

form".<sup>724</sup> In terms of production, this criticism was aimed at what were seen as the unscrupulous profit motives of manufacturers and retailers who supposedly used these elements, in both design and promotion, to stimulate false desire in the passive female consumer. The womenswear section's use of the visual culture of the feminised shopping experience was therefore a clear contradiction of the design sensibilities of the exhibition's organisers; an illustration that women's clothing (and by extension the idea of London as a fashion centre) sat outside the aesthetic and ideological 'comfort zone' of the proselytisers of design reform.

There is however nothing within the CoID's, Board of Trade's or Incorporated Society's documentation of the event to suggest that the organisers found the inclusion of couture problematic. In fact, the members of the Society were given full control over what garments they provided and despite the assertion that this was not a trade show, were promised that their models, which were available for immediate sale, would 'not be exhibited anonymously'.<sup>725</sup> Unlike the justification for the support of the designers' businesses espoused by the government and within the daily press, the exhibition's catalogue, which only documents the name of the fabric manufacturer for five of the twenty-eight couture garments, suggests that the exhibition's organisers also felt little need to fulfill the Incorporated Society's usual political and industrial disclaimer of 'shop window' for the textile trade.<sup>726</sup>

In light of this neutrality it is therefore insightful, in terms of the operation of the Incorporated Society and the networks of support that developed around it, to address its inclusion in relation to the two main politically sensitive problems design historians have shown were encountered by the Exhibition's organisers. Firstly the encouragement of and inability to fulfill consumer demand and secondly the accusation of industrial bias in the selection process.<sup>727</sup>

The first problem, caused by the lack of product availability, arose as many of the overall exhibits were prototypes or for export only. This led to the unfortunate re-

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<sup>724</sup> Ibid. pp. 54 – 55. As Sparke (pp. 56 -57) points out 'women and their tastes – their preoccupation with surface rather than substance, with ephemerality rather than universality, with appearance rather than with utility, and with the inessential rather than the essential – provided a broad cultural frame for the criticisms of nineteenth-century reformers.'

<sup>725</sup> *MISDM*, 28 March 1946

<sup>726</sup> *Britain Can Make It Exhibition Catalogue*. Group M – Fashions – Couturiers, pp. 182 -187 (Design Archive, University of Brighton)

The couture garments that were noted for the use of British fabric were Russell's dinner gown with fabric by Silkellal, Amies dinner dress with fabric by John Knox, Molyneux's morning dress with fabric by Dobroyd and Delanghe's debutante dress with fabric produced by students of Bromley School of Art. None of the wholesale dressmaking houses documented their fabric sources.

<sup>727</sup> Maguire and Woodham, 1997

christening of the exhibition, by some sectors of the press hostile to the government, as 'Britain Can't Have It'.<sup>728</sup> The audience at the exhibition may have been primarily 'artisan working class', yet in terms of consumer provocation, both social surveys and press reports suggest that there was little negative criticism of the inclusion of unattainable made-to-measure and exclusive ready-to-wear dress.<sup>729</sup> In fact, after the furnished rooms, Mass Observation recorded the women's dress section as the exhibition's second most popular category.<sup>730</sup> This favourable public attitude can perhaps be explained by a review of the Incorporated Society's January export shows in *Reynold's News and Sunday Citizen*. In the article, 'Clothes Go Abroad But Ideas Stay Home', this egalitarian, co-operative party owned publication argued that the post-war inaccessibility of couture was 'actually less irritating' than it sounded. For the home-dressmaker, there were 'some good ideas to be had in these new collections and even in pre-war days less than one Englishwoman in a thousand could afford to get her clothes from Hartnell, Molyneux and the other big dress designers'.<sup>731</sup> The hand-made production process and the price of couture positioned it well above the expectations of the exhibition's audience, which meant that it provided 'ideas' and entertainment value rather than a trigger for consumer dissatisfaction. The high price of their crafted products positioned them above the fashion trade and this justification is important to understand what membership of the Incorporated Society brought to these dressmakers. It demonstrates how the support and promotion of the Incorporated Society took on neutrality because the designers' work was seen as cultural rather than commercial. So for example in 1946, Cecil McGivern (the BBC's Director General) granted a dispensation to the members of the Incorporated Society which excluded them from its policy to stop inadvertent advertising because the couturiers were not seen as 'advertisers in the accepted sense of the word'.<sup>732</sup> This meant that they became the only fashion designers automatically credited if their work featured on British television.

The second problem encountered by the exhibition's organisers (something that continued to haunt the CoID) was industry antagonism caused by their selection process.

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<sup>728</sup> Ibid.

<sup>729</sup> The demographic of the exhibition attendees is demonstrated in the Mass Observation survey of the event, which documented 2,523 interviews and 1,000 overheard comments.

<sup>730</sup> Report by Mass Observation during their survey of BCMI, (ID/903) Final Total of Attendees at BCMI 1,432,546. For statistics see *Report by the Director to the Meeting of the Council of Industrial Design*, 10 January 1947

<sup>731</sup> Margot Lawrence, 'Clothes Go Abroad But Ideas Stay Home', *Reynolds News and Sunday Citizen*, 3 February 1946 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>732</sup> From: Head of T. S (Norman Collins) To Tel P. D. 1<sup>st</sup> Jan 1948 Subject FASHION, T16/69/1 Fashion File 1 1946-1958, BBC Written Archive

The 67 per cent rejection rate of items submitted to the selection panel by 3,385 separate firms was primarily caused by the excluded producers' equation of 'good design' with their best sellers rather than the aesthetic ideals of the CoID.<sup>733</sup> This disjuncture, between the ideological opinions of the advocates of design reform and the commercial knowledge of particular producers, led to accusations of industrial bias.<sup>734</sup> To offer a fair representation of London's high fashion businesses the selection panel included garments from both the ten couturiers in the Incorporated Society and four non-members (the couture houses of Jacqueline Vienne, Lachasse, Strassner and Rahvis). It then contained ready-made garments many by members of the London Model House Group, which was created in 1946 and represented the interests of what was known as the 'wholesale couture' and included companies such as Susan Small and Frederick Stark.<sup>735</sup> These businesses all had West End showrooms with similar décor to the couture houses where they held exclusive presentations of their new collections at the same time as the couturiers. Whilst their designs were not original and primarily adapted models, their output in comparison to mass manufacture was relatively small and individualistic, their products were entirely non-utility and their standards of craftsmanship and quality were high. Although clothes were not made-to-measure they were cut and made individually on the stand and no bulk orders or long production runs were taken. Their distribution, through the model departments of high-class stores and through small specialist shops, was also highly selective and guaranteed a level of exclusivity as each manufacturer generally confined their models to a specific outlet in any particular town or city.<sup>736</sup> They also had the capital to devote to expensive advertising campaigns in magazines such as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, which made many of these businesses household names. The 'wholesale couture' therefore presented a new level of competition to the 'bespoke couture'.

The minutes of the Incorporated Society's meetings show that its members were uneasy about showing their designs next to the 'wholesalers'. The organisers therefore constructed a discernable difference between the products that were bespoke and those that were ready-made. This construction of industrial hierarchy is made clear

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<sup>733</sup> Woodham, 1986, p.27 For a full consideration of the problems encountered in the organisers' selection policy see, Woodham and Maguire, 1997

<sup>734</sup> Maguire, 1997, p. 119

<sup>735</sup> For a detailed consideration of this group see, Elizabeth Tragenza, *London before it swung: British ready-to-wear under the Model House Group and Fashion House Group 1946-1966* (Unpublished MA Thesis, Royal College of Art, 2014)

<sup>736</sup> Richard Collier, *The Fashion Story* (2), *Housewife*, June 1952, pp. 50 – 53, (51)



Figure 118: Images of the Incorporated Society's clothes from *Design 46*



Figure 119: Images of Wholesale Model House Clothes in *Design 46*



not only by their separation within the exhibition's dress display, but also in the promotional images used in the Council's publication *Design 46: A Survey of British Industrial Design as Displayed in the Britain Can Make it Exhibition*. Figures 118 to 119, demonstrate the simple representational strategy used to ensure industrial distinction and hierarchy, whereby the different types of fashion production were presented in either an interior or exterior setting. The fashion section of the publication, created under the direction of Audrey Withers (Editor of *Vogue*), therefore adhered to conventions upheld by high-fashion magazines, where it was customary for couture to be presented in illustration or photographed in formal studio settings, while outdoor reportage style photography was usually reserved for ready-to-wear products. This conferred greater exclusivity to the former, as the artificial confines of the studio bore little relation to everyday life. In comparison, the outdoors seemingly brought the ready-to-wear clothing closer to reality; 'albeit', as Rebecca Arnold has pointed out, 'seen through the prism of photographers' and fashion editors' idealisations of real lifestyles'.<sup>737</sup>

In the selected images, the couture mannequins adopt static poses of haughty grandeur and elegance, in front of either blank studio sets or ones that suggest an opera house or art gallery. These are not the claustrophobic spaces of the *femme d'intérieur* (although they draw on the cultural understanding of her leisured lifestyle and respectability). Rather they are the spaces of fashionable society's elite recreation and display.<sup>738</sup> In contrast, the wholesale mannequins are represented at an empty funfair or in an anonymous street, which suggests a slightly different type of woman; one who is not only socially mobile and open to the everyday urban experience but also closer to the lower middle-class consumer. The more sculptural quality of the couture evening and daywear seen in the angular shape of Hartnell's single-shouldered black velvet evening dress with jutting skirt; the turned-up, pointed collar of Creed's suit; the sharpness of Thaarup's millinery, is suggestive of a higher level of creative design. The wholesale model houses' clothes are less dramatic, angularity is removed and the silhouette, from the turbans, to the rounded lapels and the less detailed construction, is softer and therefore less aesthetically defined. The separation of both the photographic space and the clothing styles therefore conferred different ideas of leisure, class and respectability

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<sup>737</sup> Arnold, 2009, p.33

<sup>738</sup> The term 'femme d'intérieur' is difficult to translate by a single phrase: roughly 'homemaker', literally 'woman of indoors/inside' she is an important component in the understanding of femininity in the nineteenth-century, and the theory of the separation of the spheres. See for example, Leonora Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780 – 1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987)

and alleviated the misgivings expressed by the couturiers' about presenting their models alongside those of the high-level ready-to-wear industry.<sup>739</sup>

In this way, the BCMI organisers constructed an apparently unchallenged design hierarchy for British fashion. However, although there appears to have been an unproblematic industrial consensus, antagonism caused by the CoID's selection process (which included only fourteen couture and thirty-six high-end wholesale model houses) is made apparent by the actions taken by the Guild of British Creative Designers. This trade association represented twenty-two ready-to-wear houses, and saw all but three of its members excluded from Britain Can Make It.<sup>740</sup> This prompted the Guild's large-scale *Parade of Fashion* held at the Royal Albert Hall shortly after the exhibition opened.<sup>741</sup> This presentation received a large amount of public attention, as the clothes were presented on Cochran's showgirls and it was broadcast by the BBC and filmed by Pathé under the (misleading) heading *Mayfair Modes: Albert Hall fashion shows Couture Ball, Guild of British Designers*. In an obvious challenge to the 'official' representatives of creative British fashion, the showcase was then taken on the maiden voyage of the Queen Elizabeth to Canada under the heading 'The British Ambassadors of Fashion'.<sup>742</sup>

The Guild, to draw attention away from the official exhibits, also orchestrated a form of guerrilla intervention, when it sent the Goldwyn Girls (an American dance troupe), dressed in a selection of its models, to pose for the press in front of the couture display. (Figure 120) The cultural understanding of showgirl identity, as Andrea Stuart has shown, 'is that of the sexual predator as well as that of the corrupted innocent, an emblem of European wickedness as well as Broadway glitz [...] a cipher on to which her audiences have projected profound social anxieties'.<sup>743</sup> The Guild's use of showgirls was therefore subversive as it linked their clothing to sexual display and unrestrained consumption. Antonia Lant has fully explored the precarious status of female glamour that developed in Britain throughout the war, where 'female sexuality was threatening to

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<sup>739</sup> *MISDM*, 28 March 1946

<sup>740</sup> The Guild of British Creative Designers included 22 limited companies all with a W1 address: Acquer, Arthur Banks, Baroque, Mary Black, Samuel Bloom & Co., Fischelis, Harvey & Clark, Madame Hayward, Elizabeth Henry, Lady in Black Fashions, Doree Leventhal, Mercia & Co., Vivian Porter & Co., Reissman & Chaim, Selincourt & Sons, Travella & Selita E. Seton, Cotterill & Co., J.S. Sharpe, B. & M. Simmone, C.R. Welford & Co., Louis Levy and Martha Hill of Leicester.

<sup>741</sup> 'Mayfair Modes: Albert Hall fashion shows Couture Ball, Guild of British Designers,' 1946, [www.britishpathe.com/video/mayfair-modes/query/design](http://www.britishpathe.com/video/mayfair-modes/query/design)

<sup>742</sup> TV Outside Broadcast, *Albert Hall Fashion Parade*, 2 October 1946 (BBC Written Archive T14/15/1) this exhibition is briefly mentioned in Alexandra Palmer, 2001, p. 26. In November when it arrived in Canada it was presented at Eaton's department store in Toronto

<sup>743</sup> Andrea Stuart, *Showgirls* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996) p.1 – 2



Figure 120: Press publicity photographs of Goldwyn Girls in garments by the Guild of British Creative Designers in front of the Britain Can Make It couture display



Figure 121: CoID Publicity Photograph of the actress Valerie Hobson on the BCMI Couture Carousel inspecting Hartnell's white satin evening dress patterned in 'white rose of York' design printed by Grafton Fabrics of Manchester

wartime security, as well as the climate of austerity'.<sup>744</sup> The Guild's use of the showgirl as fashion mannequin therefore contradicted the politics of post war British consumption; where rationing, the utility scheme and propaganda for restraint continued to politicize female glamour. An example, which demonstrates a more acceptable form of mediation, can be seen in Figure 121, which shows the actress Valerie Hobson on the couture carousel inspecting a rose-printed evening gown by Norman Hartnell. Hobson, as one of her obituaries points out 'exuded breeding and class' and 'had a certain upper-crust aloofness' and therefore an appropriate persona for the mediation of the London couturiers' work. As the lead actress of David Lean's recently released film *Great Expectations* in which she played the alluring Estella, Hobson may have brought a level of cinematic glamour to the exhibition, instead, however this official press photograph, staged and released by the Council of Industrial Design, presented her in heavy topcoat and head scarf: a more acceptable image of British femininity.

The BBC may have officially reported the Guild of British Creative Designer's omission from the Council's exhibition as a consequence of the limited floor space within the Victoria and Albert Museum.<sup>745</sup> However, when comparisons are made of the clothes contained in the Guild's *Parade of Fashion* and those accepted for display at the Britain Can Make It exhibition; the role of the organisers' aesthetic judgment is made apparent. This selection criteria is illustrated in Audrey Withers' text in *Design 46* where she pointed out that:

The couture and the wholesale field have this year made their first collections completely free from austerity restrictions. The result, in the couture collections and in those designed by the best wholesale firms, has been wholly admirable, but progressively less so the further one goes down the scale of fashion production. It is the old trouble of confusing liberty with license, one only hopes one is seeing the first fling of reactions for it would be a sad thing if, after four years of war clothes that have at least been clean and uncluttered (enabling English women to live down their deserved-pre-war-reputation for being all bits and pieces) our manufacturers were unable to replace the discipline of official restrictions with the discipline of taste. [...] All in all, London's new season models are for the most part exceptionally wearable and becoming, adjectives most gratefully used by women to describe

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<sup>744</sup> Lant, 1991, p. 79

<sup>745</sup> Script for BBC Programme, TV Outside Broadcast, *Albert Hall Fashion Parade*, 2 October 1946 (BBC Written Archives, T14/15/1)



Figure 122: Film of the Guild of British Creative Fashion Designers 'Parade of Fashion' October 1946

clothes which look as if they had been designed with them in mind, and not merely as showpieces for display by showgirls.<sup>746</sup>

Withers' comments, written before the exhibition opened, appear aimed at the Guild of British Creative Designers whose rebellious use of glamorous mannequins was matched by the design of many of its clothes. Figure 122 demonstrates that many of the Guild's members turned to overstated ornamentation rather than 'clean and uncluttered' design, with large bows on pockets, feathers and pannier skirts, enlarged shoulders with exaggerated epaulets and fringing. These design styles appear to fulfil Withers' worst fears for the lack of restraint brought about by a relaxation of restrictions. With the British post-war social and political order imagined around an austere, self-abnegating consumer the Guild's promotion of mass-market luxury and feminine transformation clearly threatened the official ideology that now surrounded fashion production and promotion.

The hand-made process of couture production was to a certain extent an anachronism and sat precariously within the CoID's doctrine of 'good design', which was based on the ideals of Modernism, aimed to produce timeless (therefore not subject to fashionable change) standard quality products, through mass production, at the best price, for the benefit of a universal consumer. This objective was however part of a long concern for rational design that prioritized integrity over commercial expediency and in this way the high quality and small-scale of couture production fitted the design reform agenda. The aesthetic of the couture's carousel display at BCMI may have sat uneasily within the CoID exhibition, yet in comparison to the work of the Guild of British Fashion Designers, this was a gentrified and officially sanctioned presentation of feminine consumer culture. The style of the models and their target market exemplified class-based English good taste, which in turn legitimised fashion production for a design reform establishment often adverse to its stimulation of conspicuous and supposedly irrational consumption. Throughout 1946, despite made-to-measure dress sitting precariously within the Council's definition of 'good' industrial practice, the London couturiers were therefore (as they had been in the pre-war Fashion Group of Great Britain) repositioned as a legitimate body of expert tastemakers. This, for both the Council of Industrial Design and the Board of Trade, rendered their inclusion within a

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<sup>746</sup> Audrey Withers, 'Fashion, Dress, Fabrics and Accessories,' *Design 46: A Survey of British Industrial Design as Displayed in the Britain Can Make It Exhibition Organised by the British Council of Industrial Design* (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1946) pp. 45 – 61, (47)



state-funded event immune to accusations of industrial favouritism. Yet, as the construction of hierarchy it created demonstrates this ensured that the Incorporated Society as a professional organisation operated as a vehicle of exclusion and power.

#### **4:3) Land of Hope and Glory: The Dior Effect in a Country of No Privileges**

By the end of 1946 the members of the Incorporated Society held an enviable commercial position. However, in February 1947, just as Britain entered a period of greater austerity, the newly established couture house of Christian Dior presented its seminal first collection. Rechristened the New Look by the fashion press its voluptuous and exaggerated silhouette, with highly defined waist and bust and excessively long, full skirt was quickly adopted and promoted to give a new silhouette for day and eveningwear, particularly in the all-important and receptive American market (Figure 123). In terms of exports to the American market, Dior's New Look was released at a particularly astute moment as four months earlier Congress had removed the L85 clothing restrictions. With America set to become a buyer's rather than a seller's market, the flamboyancy of the ninety-seven garments in this collection, which used an unprecedented amount of luxury fabric, fulfilled a pent-up consumer desire for a new, more unrestrained style. The response of the international press, fashion industry and public to Dior's collection reasserted Paris' position as the world's fashion centre and altered the discourse that surrounded couture production.<sup>747</sup> This section will therefore explore how the reconstruction of London's couture industry and its national identity as a fashion centre were closely aligned with both Britain's economic and political situation and the effects that Dior and the New Look had on the international fashion industry.

Victor Stiebel in the press release for his January 1947 collection may have recognised the need for this new silhouette, in his assertion that:

The essentially geometric shape of the early '40s has been broken down and is giving way to curves and femininity [...] in spite of the restrictions that are still with us, the door is open to the post-war shape [...] A good deal will happen during 1947; good clothes, freak clothes, frankly bad clothes will be shown, and it will be difficult to segregate the good stuff on which future fashion will depend. There will be shocks,

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<sup>747</sup> The impact on the fashion industry is well documented. For the most recent example see, Veronique Pouillard, 'Keeping designs and brands authentic: the resurgence of the post-war French fashion business under the challenge of US mass production', *European Review of History*, Vol. 20, No. 5, 2013, pp. 815 - 835



Figure 123: An example of a model of Christian Dior's 'New Look' collection from February 1947

pleasure, anger and excitement. But the breath of fresh air, which stirred development in the dress trade in '46 will become a minor hurricane of experiment in '47.<sup>748</sup>

However, the members of the Incorporated Society, constrained by government regulations, a shortage of high-grade fabric and also increased austerity were in little position to fulfill these expectations. The start of 1947 saw Britain's economic recovery came to an abrupt halt when production and export were interrupted by a fuel crisis and one of the coldest winters on record.<sup>749</sup> The resultant dollar shortage saw Austerity measures increase and the couturiers found business operation more difficult. The government even informed the Society's members that they would no longer receive their previous allocation levels of luxury export fabrics, a threat only prevented by a large amount of lobbying from the textile export groups.<sup>750</sup> In the end, the July collections were only made possible by this 'good-will of the textile industry' and a 'coupon float' for accessories from the government.<sup>751</sup> 'In bomb-damaged London', where the fashion journalist Bettina Ballard claimed you were constantly 'reminded that this was a land of no privileges [...] a country where rationing was accepted by all classes, where integrity, and fair play were in full force', there was little space, particularly in the production of daywear, for overt showmanship. The New Look with its excessive use of fabric was a direct assault on clothing regulations and undermined political propaganda for consumer restraint.

The British government considered the new silhouette an act of 'irresponsibility on the part of France' and sought to distance itself and the public from what it saw as 'immoral French behaviour'.<sup>752</sup> The Board of Trade therefore issued a request for the nation's fashion industry to 'boycott the Paris styles' and reassert the British virtues of frugality and restraint.<sup>753</sup> The government also called a meeting of the press, which asked its members not to publicise or support the longer skirt.<sup>754</sup> In response Anne Scott James (Editor of *Harper's Bazaar*) sent a letter to *The Times*, to question the economic viability of this political intervention:

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<sup>748</sup> Victor Stiebel *Export Collection*, Press Release, January 1947 (Property of Adrian Woodhouse)

<sup>749</sup> Cairncross, 1995, p. 37. For a detailed consideration of the crippling effect the weather had on Britain's industry and economy see Alex Robertson, *The Bleak Midwinter 1947* (Manchester University Press, 1987)

<sup>750</sup> MISDM, 17 September 1947

<sup>751</sup> Ibid.

<sup>752</sup> Michael and Ariane Batterberry, *Mirror, Mirror: A Social History of Fashion* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977) p. 348

<sup>753</sup> Farid Chenoune, *Dior* (New York: Assouline, 2007) p. 20

<sup>754</sup> Alison Settle, 'Wool as a Fashion Fabric: The Wool Education Society Lecture at The Royal Society of Arts,' (London: Department of Education of the International Wool Secretariat) 1950

Fashion is to the clothing trade what design is to the textile, pottery, leather and other trades. Happily, the government is showing a sincere faith in the importance of design. Now it must begin to believe in fashion, too. [...] But if they [the London fashion producers] are expected to lag years behind designers in America, France, Italy and other countries, they have no hope at all. Sir Stafford Cripps [the Chancellor of the Exchequer] cannot halt the world march of fashion. He has the choice of encouraging our manufacturers to keep up with fashion or of forcing England to trail behind, an isolated pocket of dowdiness.<sup>755</sup>

By August 1947, however, the press and fashion industry had ignored the Board's requests and fashion reports of the Incorporated Society's collections were overshadowed by commentary on the 'battle of the long skirt'.<sup>756</sup> In particular much was made of Hartnell's rejection of the 'frivolity' of the longer skirt versus Stiebel's embrace of the fashion as 'inevitable'.<sup>757</sup> So much so, that in a radio broadcast for the *BBC Home Service* in October 1947, Stiebel was forced to defend his collection's skirt length as he claimed he had been 'accused of introducing a fashion which is uneconomic, impractical, unattractive and worst of all, unpatriotic'.<sup>758</sup> The initial government intervention had not therefore stopped the influence of the New Look and by the end of 1947, as initial political and public outrage dissipated, it became undeniably popular and its effects began to not only overshadow but also direct the newspaper coverage of the Incorporated Society.<sup>759</sup>

In 1946, London couture's restrained aesthetic of discreetly tailored suits and elegant eveningwear had an advantage in an American market still guided by austerity and controls. However, after the launch of the New Look, with the L85 regulations

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<sup>755</sup> Quoted by Grace Garner in 'Now London Copes with "The New Look"', *Saturday Night*, Toronto, 15 November 1947 (DMPB)

<sup>756</sup> See for example, 'Battle of the Long Skirt: Cripps Takes A Hand', *The Recorder*, August 1947, 'New York wanted the New Look ... so you, milady, will have to grin and wear it!' *Bristol Evening News*, January 1948, 'Battle of the New Look', *Bournemouth Times and Directory*, January 1948 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>757</sup> 'Battle of the Long Skirt Is On: Cripps Takes a Hand', *The Recorder*, 3 August 1947 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>758</sup> Victor Stiebel, 'Fashion and Beauty: About Clothes', transmitted 23 October 1947 4:45 – 5:00, *BBC Radio Home Service London* (BBC Written Archives)

<sup>759</sup> Zweiniger-Bargielowska, for example, claims the rapid adoption of the New Look particularly by the adaptation of old clothing, is indicative of 'the depth of female disaffection' and therefore was an aesthetic embodiment of the 'post-war world the British Labour administration had promised but failed to deliver.' For a full consideration of the sociology of the New Look see Jessica Schwartz, *Skirting the Issue: Interweaving Dress into Sociopolitical Histories*, Unpublished Thesis in History (Columbia University, 2011) and for its adaptation within British working class dress see Angela Partington, 'Popular Fashion and Working Class Affluence' in *Chic Thrills: A Fashion Reader*, edited by Juliet Ash and Elizabeth Wilson (London: Pandora Press, 1992). For the New Look's affect on the Australian fashion market see, Margaret Maynard, "The Wishful Feeling about Curves": Fashion, Femininity and the New Look in Australia', *Journal of Design History*, Volume 8, No. 1. (1995) pp. 43 – 59

removed and Britain subject to further austerity, a marked difference in attitudes to dress design emerged amongst London, Paris, and North America. This is clearly demonstrated in documentation within biographies and press reports that comment on London's dress culture in 1947. For example, when the Canadian fashion co-coordinator of Eaton's department store wore a dinner dress in the new shape and longer length, she 'had difficulty gaining admittance at London hotels and restaurants', as their dress codes encouraged frugality and she claimed the English women admitted wore 'floor-length tatty old velvets and brocades in mid-summer'.<sup>760</sup> It is at this point that the aesthetic links between the three separate fashion centres was broken and a specific national character replaced internationalism, a factor that had played an important role within London's recognition as a fashion centre in the 1930s. In Britain restraint, except within the boundaries of export production was the expectation and social and political attitudes presented a deterrent to most forms of ostentatious display. 'The loud-voiced blasé hostess of enormous [prewar] cocktail parties' as Amies pointed out in an interview at the end of the year, had 'given place to the quiet chatelaine giving her whole charm and attention to the small intimate parties which are the most her rations will allow'.<sup>761</sup> At a time when any form of conspicuous consumption or demonstration of social inequality was to be avoided and the members of Society's ability and inclination to put itself on display disappeared, London's ability to present an authentic platform for high fashion, as it had in the 1930s, was severely restricted.

This was made most apparent when, in November 1947, the city was offered an inimitable opportunity for extravagant pageantry by the royal wedding of Princess Elizabeth. The marriage of the twenty-one year old future monarch offered incomparable scope for a flamboyant promotion of British fashion, just as the coronation of her father had ten years earlier. Now however, the country found itself in a very different economic position. The Palace therefore took a decision that the wedding would be a projection of austerity; there would be no state ball; instead of full pageantry the procession would be small with no public stands along the route or near the abbey; even the attendant troops would wear battle rather than regimental dress. Guests were limited to fewer than one hundred and requested to wear morning dress with daytime length skirts, with only the royal party allowed full-length gowns. In line with government policy for all British brides, the princess would also forgo her trousseau. In response to this decision, Digby Morton

<sup>760</sup> Dora Matthews 'Unpublished Memoirs,' Royal Ontario Museum, quoted in Palmer, 2001, p.23. For a corresponding description of London eveningwear see Ballard, 1960, p. 227

<sup>761</sup> 'A Modern Man's Ideas on Modern Women', *Modern Woman*, January 1948 (HAA)

wrote a signed letter to *The Recorder*. The couturier had just taken the position of British Merchandise Manager at the Chicago department store, Carson Pirie and found his 'trousseau display of London couture', immediately substituted by a group of French models; he therefore questioned whether the King had been badly advised:

Sir – when I read of the decision to eliminate a royal trousseau for Princess Elizabeth because of the economic conditions of this country I feel sure that no consideration can have been given to the fact that a unique and wonderful opportunity to stimulate one section of our much-needed export trade is being deliberately thrown away. [...] I can only imagine that those who recommended a policy of planning the Royal wedding on austerity lines can have no conception of the intense interest which anything concerned with Princess Elizabeth's wardrobe has not only for the women, but also for the executives of the stores throughout the States and Canada. [...] I would like to suggest that each designer [of the Incorporated Society] should contribute one model to form a royal trousseau of ten ensembles. The publicity value overseas of every material and style included in this small collection would far outweigh the amount of material used and labour expended and even the most socialist critic must admit that we need to take advantage of every asset we have to increase our national income. What European country today would not prize such an opportunity of attracting world attention – is it not too late for this matter to be reconsidered? (Signed Digby Morton)<sup>762</sup>

However rational in terms of export promotion this suggestion may have appeared, this public challenge to the validity of the King's decision was controversial. Many sectors of the British press responded to Morton's request not as a display of national altruism but of self-serving commerciality. For example, *Fabric and Fashions*, which as an export publication could have been expected to support Morton's view, claimed that the couturier had allowed his own commercial agenda and 'transatlantic ideas to influence his better judgment'. It issued a strong rebuke, that:

In view of prevailing restrictions her Royal Highness is first and foremost the heiress to the British throne and a model for her people in everyday life and affairs. She is not the all-British mannequin that Mr. Digby Morton apparently visualizes [...] it is the Royal family and no one else who should and do decide what is appropriate for an occasion of this kind. It is their wish, obviously, to share as far as possible the austerity and rationing, which govern the lives of their people. [...] The world including the American republic – has more to learn from a demonstration of that spirit than from copying a few gowns the royal bride might otherwise have permitted herself. [...] The Royal Family]

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<sup>762</sup> Digby Morton, 'Royal wedding Opportunities: is the King badly advised?' *The Recorder*, 18 October 1947 (DMPB)

symbolise Great Britain to the world, and to the world Great Britain is a country committed to seeking economic salvation in self-denial. It is a country where brides do not have a trousseau, but where all have a share of deprivations, including the heiress to the throne.<sup>763</sup>

This criticism drew on a depiction of Britain developed within wartime propaganda, which positioned the country as the 'world's morally responsible political player'.<sup>764</sup> This national identity was clearly at odds with any form of undemocratic display. The wedding gave Hartnell a prestigious commission, as he produced the bride's dress, the eight bridesmaid dresses and the going away outfit (Figure 124). However at a time when London's ability to present an authentic platform for high fashion was severely restricted the decision to hold what the press dubbed an 'austerity wedding' was in promotional terms an inimitable lost opportunity.<sup>765</sup>

Prior to the event, the Board of Trade may have been unable to use the wedding to promote British industry, yet immediately afterwards, to secure 'solid trading benefits from this admirable, if somewhat rarefied piece of solid export "prestige advertising", Harold Wilson (the Board's president) wrote to the Palace to request permission to use both the original wedding and bridesmaid dresses for the 'unexampled climax' of Hartnell's future New York show and a number of replicas for exhibit in American department stores.<sup>766</sup> Wilson supported the request by pointing out that one of the main 'difficulties' for British fashion design in the American market was 'the absence of "great names" of international standing [...] the French, have almost a monopoly of these names [...] yet as a result of the wedding, Mr. Hartnell has certainly achieved more widespread recognition than ever before as a designer of the first rank, and the clothes worn by Her Royal Highness have given rise to a new interest in British fashion design generally'.<sup>767</sup> This letter to the Palace demonstrates that by November 1947 the Board of Trade was fully aware of the positive impact Parisian couturiers such as Dior were

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<sup>763</sup> 'Trade: Trousseau Trouble', *Fashion and Fabrics*, 25 October 1947 (DMPB)

<sup>764</sup> For example, the propaganda disseminated by the Ministry of Information throughout the war presented the notion of Britain as ruled by moral righteousness and united across class and gender. For further detail see Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995)

<sup>765</sup> 'Great Britain Rich Fabrics, Simple Styles for Wedding Guests', *Women's Wear Daily*, 3 November 1947 (VSPA/AAD/1994)

<sup>766</sup> M.M. Johnstone *Board of Trade Internal Memo*, 15 December 1947 (B.T. 64/1026)

<sup>767</sup> *Ibid.*





Figure 124: The royal wedding, 20 November 1947, designed by Norman Hartnell

(Top) Princess Elizabeth's Wedding dress  
 (Bottom Left) Princess Elizabeth's going away outfit  
 (Bottom Right) Princess Margaret's Bridesmaid Dress

having on French exports, which in turn encouraged the British government to reassess its attitude towards and support of its small-scale couture industry.

The Palace however rejected Wilson's proposals, and insisted the original dress remain in Britain to 'give the people, particularly those in the "textile" areas, a rather special favour'.<sup>768</sup> Whilst the Board of Trade's appeal to the Palace to promote the British fashion trade may have been unsuccessful it did lead to the instigation from January 1948 of a twice-yearly government financed reception to launch the couturiers' export collections. Board of Trade records show that this government sponsored reception was a specific response to trade figures released by the Chambre Syndicale, which claimed that by the end of 1947 both the number of foreign applications to gain access to the Paris dress shows and the export of French textiles to dollar markets had 'increased almost three times since the first Dior collection was shown'.<sup>769</sup>

The economic success of Dior's new couture house, as the fashion historian Margaret Maynard demonstrates, became 'locked into the trade wars' of a number of 'post-war economies' it so doing it also brought about a fundamental change in both the design practice of the French couturiers and the reportage of the fashion press.<sup>770</sup> Each season, there was now an expectation that couturiers would present a flamboyant new 'line' and newsworthy vision of future fashion. The new 'staffs of the mass media', as the business manager of *Vogue* pointed out, focused on 'the more extreme models, on the principle that news means sensation' and many Parisian couturiers quickly 'learned that they must produce extravaganzas to obtain publicity'.<sup>771</sup> For example, while Dior created controversy through the re-introduction of a corseted waist and excessive skirt, other French couturiers ensured similar recognition by designing impractical models such as the much-reported tubular skirt of January 1948: 'so slim that at Paquin's the model girls could just step down from the displaying platform [...whilst the] 'hem-span' at Jacques Fath's made the mannequins teeter on the runways'.<sup>772</sup>

In 1947, with London couture constrained by social, political and economic austerity its collections, particularly in comparison to those in Paris, lacked a certain amount of glamour. The restrained aesthetic of the London couture shows therefore led

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<sup>768</sup> T. P. Harvey (Private Secretary to the Queen) Letter to Harold Wilson, 10 December 1947 (B.T. 64/1026)

<sup>769</sup> Ibid. These trade figures were also reported in Alison Settle, 'The Paris Shows: 'New Look' Established,' *The Observer*, 7 February 1948

<sup>770</sup> Maynard, 1995, pp. 43 -59(45)

<sup>771</sup> Yoxall, 1966, p.51

<sup>772</sup> Alison Settle, 'Economics of the New Look: French campaign to make dollars out of textiles,' *Yorkshire Post*, 18 February 1948 (ASA/GB/NNAF/P44076)

a number of British journalists to question not only the validity but also the competency of the Incorporated Society's members. For example, the young fashion correspondent Patricia Lennard, who in her summation of the January collections in February 1947, made a direct assault and claimed to:

Feel cheated [... as] British fashion seems forever to hover on the fringe of something really lovely, but never quite makes it. [...] It is about time the British fashion industry, particularly the end which calls itself creative, stopped patting itself on the back at organised shows and fashion balls and realised there is very little that is creative in British fashion [...] If our aim is world-wide export against world-wide competition, and if all that results is a silly wrangle about one facet of fashion; the longer skirt, and a lot of much-publicised fashion shows that do not always represent the best British fashions, then it no longer applies. If we must export, where are our new fashions, our new designers, our unity of purpose and design in the fashion industry and between the industry and the Board of Trade.<sup>773</sup>

A crucial effect of the exaggerated models presented by Parisian newcomers such as Dior and Fath, on the mediation of the Incorporated Society was that many fashion journalists now expected couture houses to include 'novelty models,' that would give them something interesting to write about.

American buyers also fuelled the expectation for sensation rather than restraint, as, faced with a buyers' market, they now needed new fashions to avoid market saturation and eye-catching models for either publicity purposes or inspiration for modified versions by mass manufacturers. French couture houses were able to do this because their collections were bigger than those presented in London. For example, after the success of the New Look, Dior moved to the presentation of around 200 models per collection. Alexandra Palmer's research has shown that around a quarter of these models did not sell, either because they were unsatisfactory to the buyers or were created merely for publicity.<sup>774</sup> Hardy Amies' collections offer a representative comparison of the size of London's shows. Even though he operated one of the Incorporated Society's most successful businesses he only ever presented a collection of approximately 60 garments. These were evenly distributed between suits, day-dresses and evening, cocktail, dinner and party dresses, with 'perhaps two little numbers

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<sup>773</sup> Patricia Lennard, 'London breaks with Paris', *Evening Standard*, 4 Feb 1947 (DMPB)

<sup>774</sup> Alexandra Palmer, 'Inside Paris Haute Couture' in *The Golden Age of Couture: Paris and London 1947 – 57*, edited by Claire Wilcox, V & A Publishing, 2007, pp. 63 - 83

which may be just to give the whole thing a fillip, or merely for publicity'.<sup>775</sup> By the 1950s, even mid-scale Parisian couture houses presented twice this number of models.<sup>776</sup> One of the main reasons for this difference was the financial support offered to Parisian couturiers by the French textile industry.

The infrastructure and business paradigm of Maison Dior is the most pertinent example of this supportive network. Tomoko Okawa's analysis of this company's records shows that it 'marked a total departure from the way French couture had been run in the past'.<sup>777</sup> This new couture business was based on unprecedented finance, it was capitalised with an initial investment of \$48,000, and opened with three workrooms and eighty-five members of staff.<sup>778</sup> By 1954, it had five buildings, twenty-eight workrooms, and one thousand employees, it was a multinational corporation doing business on five continents, with eight overseas branches and sixteen associated companies and by the time of his death in 1958, Dior's products represented half of France's haute couture exports.<sup>779</sup> This was made possible because it was part of Comptoire de l'Industrie Cotonniere (CIC), a vertically integrated textile business operated by the French cotton magnate Marcel Boussac. From its inception, the Maison Dior had three interrelated objectives: to sell cotton textiles; to expand into the international market as a ready-to-wear company with wholesale offices in New York, London and Caracas; and to develop licensing agreements.

Christian Dior was the company's chief designer and general manager. Unlike the members of the Incorporated Society, he did not own the business, he was an employee whose bonuses were based on the amount of licenses he signed with mass-market manufacturers to produce lines under his brand name. To achieve these objectives the company needed Dior to be a household name and acknowledged fashion dictator. The publicity generated by spectacular models was therefore a particularly important component within this business model. Dior and newcomers such as Fath who followed this business model, made considerable impact on the traditional

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<sup>775</sup> Amies, 1954, p. 176

<sup>776</sup> By the 1950s as Alexander Palmer has shown, each season, even moderate sized Paris houses such as Griffe and Dessès designed over double the garments of a London couture house. 'Griffe and Dessès designed around 110 – 170 garments a season, while Dior presented between 230 – 250 of which approximately 48 would eventually be eliminated', Palmer, 2007, pp. 63 - 83

<sup>777</sup> Tomoko Okawa, 'Licensing Practices at Maison Christian Dior,' in *Producing Fashion: Commerce, Culture and Consumers*, edited by Regina L. Blaszczyk, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 2008, pp.82 – 110 (84)

<sup>778</sup> Okawa, 2008, pp.82 – 110 (88) At its launch in October 1946, Maison Dior was capitalized at old F5 million (about \$42,000)

<sup>779</sup> Ibid.

approach of couture, it was no longer produced in order to sell models to inspire foreign reproduction and ready-to-wear but primarily to provide the prestige and branded identity for a range of licensed products.<sup>780</sup> Company records reveal that despite worldwide acclaim Maison Dior did not show a profit until 1950 when its licensing arrangements became fully operational.<sup>781</sup> London couturiers, in comparison, did not have the financial support to design for publicity or make a loss from their collections. They needed to ensure their designs were relevant and wearable so that the majority would sell to both clients and buyers.

The sizes of the London collections were also contained by the couturiers' lack of financial backing from the British textile industry. Except for Jacqmar, which housed Victor Stiebel's operation, no records survive of any other British textile company or manufacturer that invested directly in a London couture business. The Incorporated Society may have received financial support from the textile industry, however its records show that this was nominal. For example the contributions in October 1946 from the International Wool Secretariat, National Wool Textile Corporation, the Cotton Board and the British Rayon Federation were £300 each - not even half the amount they contributed to the aforementioned South American tour ten years earlier.<sup>782</sup>

The lack of a substantial investment from the textile industry saw the Society's export collections make only limited attempts to fulfill the role of 'shop-window' for its manufacturers. In fact one of the most notable aspects of the London couture collections was their use of French fabric.<sup>783</sup> For example, in the Spring/ Summer collections of 1947 only French rayon was used in all the dresses and blouses.<sup>784</sup> The Incorporated Society's unpatriotic use of imported material can to a certain extent be explained by the government policy that allowed one third of imported high-grade fabric to be used for domestic production while its British equivalent was for export only. Yet, the reliance on

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<sup>780</sup> For a detailed consideration of the process that saw French couture houses turned into brands see, Pouillard, 2013, pp. 815 - 835

<sup>781</sup> Ibid.

<sup>782</sup> Even by 1951, with the textile industry operating under less restrictions the contributions to the society remained similar: £250 from the International Wool Secretariat, £300 from the National Wool and Textile Export Corporation, £250 from the Cotton Board, £300 from the British Rayon Federation, then £100 each from the Silk and Rayon Users Association, The Irish Linen Guild and the Federation of Lace and Embroidery Employers Associations.) It also received £1,050 from its designer - members' subscriptions. Its expenditure for the year was £2, 895 with £467 spent on entertaining and travelling the rest was spent on the administration and running costs of the office, clerical staff salaries, printing and stationary, postage and telegrams etc. Details taken from *Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers Income and Expenditure Account for the Year Ended 31 December 1951*

<sup>783</sup> The couturiers' use of French fabric generated a substantial amount of press commentary. See for example, 'French Influence on Fashion', *Yorkshire Observer*, January 1947 (VSPA/AAD/1994) and Alison Settle, 'From A Woman's Viewpoint', *The Observer*, 2 February 1947 (ASA/GB/NNAF/P44076)

<sup>784</sup> Alison Settle, 'From A Woman's Viewpoint', *The Observer*, 3 August 1947 (ASA/GB/NNA/P44076)

foreign fabric was also because the couturiers found that British textile manufactures could not supply products of a similar quality and quantity. Stiebel, in defense of his prevalent use of imported fabric in July 1947, told reporters that although he required twenty tweeds for his collection he was only able to secure five from British producers, 'of which two had been known to the American trade for a year'.<sup>785</sup>

The scarcity of high-grade British textiles resulted from three specific government policies: import restrictions; export quotas and purchase tax. Firstly, treasury restrictions on the amount of raw material imported into Britain reduced production capacity particularly in the silk and cotton industry. Secondly, the government took the decision to set export targets in weight, rather than quality or suitability to demand. While the export market was reported to be interested in 'light fabrics, that adhered to the stipulations of the "new look", British textile production was therefore focused on 'heavy woollens, or solid rayons'.<sup>786</sup> Thirdly, for textile manufacturers the high level of purchase tax imposed on non-utility fabrics until 1955, discouraged the production and retail of high-quality materials for export because 'if they were not suitable for any particular market there was little opportunity of sales in the home market because of the high price'.<sup>787</sup>

Appropriate couture fabrics were therefore difficult to come by. When the dress designers did find British fabric in the right weight and quality they claimed that it was often difficult to meet demand because fabric merchants 'failed to redeem their undertaking to reserve certain quantities of fabric'.<sup>788</sup> With British textile manufacture focused on bulk production of mid-range fabrics for export and utility fabrics for the domestic market cooperation between the textile industry and the London couturiers, was severely restricted. The role of shop window for the textile industry, one of the key objectives set out in the Society's Constitution, therefore struggled to come to fruition.

Due to the size of the Paris couture collections there was more scope for the generation of ideas and changes in each season's styles. French models were often used not for direct sale but as guidance for the mass-market wholesale trade, the home dressmaker and after 1948 the paper pattern industry from which the couturiers received substantial royalties. This dissemination of the designs throughout different levels of the fashion market was beneficial for the sale of fabric, and subsidies from the French textile

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<sup>785</sup> Ibid.

<sup>786</sup> Minutes of Meeting held at the British Rayon Centre, 18 January 1950

<sup>787</sup> Minutes of Meeting held at the British Rayon Centre 18 January 1950 For a similar analysis see *Lancashire and White Hall: The Diary of Raymond Streat, Volume II, 1939 – 1987*, edited by Marguerite Dupree, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987) p. xvii

<sup>788</sup> MISDM, 2 March 1948

industry ensured that the Parisian couturiers were financially compensated when new models generated mass-market demand for specific materials. In comparison, the London couturiers were given little financial incentive to generate textile sales and due to problems with supply often used foreign fabric. In terms of the Incorporated Society's export collection the focus was primarily on the sale of models to retailers with exclusive made-to-measure dressmaking departments rather than inspiration for adaptation by mass-market manufacturers. It was therefore notable that the main American buyers present at the London collections were sent by department stores rather than mass manufacturers, often for products that were ready for immediate sale without adaptation. With only limited support from the textile industry the London couturiers had to ensure that they could sell the majority of their models, and this in turn controlled the type of garments they produced and their design identity within the export market.

In February 1948, the front cover of *Everybody's* (the weekly tabloid magazine that was widely syndicated in the United States) featured a suit by Hardy Amies under the heading 'Goodbye Uniformity' (Figure 125). The model with long pleated skirt and tailored jacket was chosen to signal an end to austerity and restraint. At this point, the long economic period of suspense, which started in 1945 with the termination of the Lend-Lease aid agreement was seen to be coming to an end due to the much-anticipated first payments of American Marshall Aid (the European Recovery Program).<sup>789</sup> By July the access this aid gave to raw materials had increased the capacity of the British textile industry, so that the couturier's ability to source British and in particular high-level woollen fabric had increased. In September the confidence evident in the declaration that 'Tweed Returns' by *Fashion and Fabrics Overseas* (the British export magazine), which was accompanied by the image of a mannequin in a tailored Victor Stiebel outfit with one foot on a map of the London underground (Figure 126) was based on Britain's increased production capacity brought about by Marshall Aid and a clear acknowledgement of the London couturiers' specific design strength and market position.

In both January and July 1948, tweed town and country suits with long pleated skirts were the most notable feature in the members of the Incorporated Society's export

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<sup>789</sup> The Marshall Plan (the European Recovery Program) was a system of American economic aid to Western Europe given between 1948-51. This money, \$3.297 billion, was not a loan and did not need to be repaid. This money was mostly used for the purchase of goods from the U.S.





Figure 125: (Top) Hardy Amies suit, 'Goodbye Uniformity',  
*Everybody's* magazine, February 1948  
 Figure 126: (Bottom) Victor Stiebel Suit, *Fashion and Fabrics Overseas*, September 1948

collections as they made up two thirds of all their models.<sup>790</sup> These garments are a clear indication of the recognition that, as a fashion centre, London was the source of quality bespoke clothing rather than inspiration for mass-market fashion. The classic 'tailor-made' was an expensive garment to produce, as it needed five people to complete the order: a tailor, his assistant, a skirt fitter, and a second fitter. The fit had to be exact and needed adjustment; this took time and skill. Pleating, in particular, was an expensive process that at this point was difficult to reproduce at a mass-market level. This not only raised the price of London clothes but also made sure that they were demonstrably exclusive luxury products. The role of the London couturier was to create exclusive clothes that whilst fashionable and sure to generate sales, sold primarily for their luxury craft production rather than for their adaptation by the mass market. This identity and market position for London couture had been clearly defined during a period of austerity and economic instability. In the 1940s, whilst Dior may have pointed the way forward for the economic viability of couture production, the members of the Incorporated Society were in no position to follow this business paradigm. They therefore continued to operate as bespoke, exclusive producers and by 1948 as Britain began to emerge from austerity their business model and design identity was set.

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The London fashion scene should from now on be looked on by fashion experts, stylists, buyers, co-ordinators and those simply following fashions as a complementary market to Paris. The London designers have no intention of competing with Paris. What they know how to do and make is as different in mood as the American approach is from the French. [...] The British are second to none in tailoring, and their reputation as a complementary source is growing annually. The demand for clothes in which the British specialize is growing annually in the United States.<sup>791</sup>

When the war ended London may have been presented with the opportunity to become the most important European fashion centre, however, during the process of reconstruction its couturiers reacted to a specific social, political, and economic environment, which shaped not only the type of models they designed but also their professional identity. In January 1949, the *New York Herald Tribune* could therefore point out that London had forged a clear space, as a complementary fashion centre to

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<sup>790</sup> *Reynolds News*, 1 February 1948. (HAA)

<sup>791</sup> Lucie Noel, 'London Styles Complement the Efforts of Paris Couture,' *New York Herald Tribune*, 25 January 1949 (Michael Sherard Press Cuttings AAD/2000/6)

Paris and buyers went there not for eye-catching designs to generate trends in mass fashion but for exclusivity and restraint.

To understand the true nature of the Incorporated Society this chapter has recognised that it was formed at a time when the mechanisms of state occupied the most dominant position within its network of operation. The consideration of the Society's activity in the late 1940s, has demonstrated not only the role the national egalitarian atmosphere that surrounded this form of luxury production played in establishing a hierarchical position that moulded its identity but also the impact of the French couture industry and the need to differentiate themselves from the close competition of the high quality of the wholesale couture being created by members of the London Model House Group

In 1946, the London couturiers' ability to create restrained wearable models had catered fully to America's regulated clothing market however, within the space of a year as US legislation was removed and a buyer's market evolved, these styles had been eclipsed by the spectacular fashions shown by Parisian couturiers such as Dior. The success of Dior's business model set up a new expectation for couture production however the members of the Incorporated Society lacked the support offered to their Parisian counterparts. Whilst industry insiders such as Cecil Beaton may retrospectively have derided the Incorporated Society's designs of the late 1940s as an exemplar of 'stick-in-the-mud dowdiness', the models they produced were a commercially informed response to their specific market and business infrastructure.<sup>792</sup>

The end of the 1940s saw the clothes of the London couturiers distinguished from their Parisian counterparts by a discourse of national identity: London was a closed world of restraint, simplicity, social adherence to norms and a high level of gentility, whereas Paris, since the launch of Dior's New Look, was the source of more experimental and creative fashions and of inspiration for mass fashion at an international level. Nowhere is the construction of this narrative more clearly demonstrated than in two films commissioned by the International Wool Secretariat and Associated British Pathé in 1950: *She Walks in Beauty: An evening of fashion at the Savoy Hotel* and *Paris City of Fashion*. Whilst the same director created both films they adhered to the specific national identity that had developed for each fashion centre. The Paris models were filmed in the 'city of fashion' at a range of iconic locations; at the Moulin Rouge, on the Champs

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<sup>792</sup> Cecil Beaton, *The Happy Years: Diaries 1944 – 48* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson), 1972, p. 54



Figure 127: 'Paris City of Fashion', Director: Terry Ashwood,  
*Associated British Pathé*, 1951





Figure 128: 'Paris City of Fashion', Director: Terry Ashwood,  
*Associated British Pathé*, 1951

Elysees or at the Palace of Versailles. As two mannequins pose in front of shots of the Eiffel Tower (Figure 127) the voiceover proclaims 'her name caresses the lips with the lightness of Champagne – Parée [...] there is more glamorous elegance to the square foot in the Champs Elysees to a square mile anywhere else on earth'. The narrator refers to the 'trends' Paris creates and 'the full power of her magic', while the clothes are described as 'artful', 'absolutely fabulous', 'ultra sophisticated', they 'inspire rhapsodies' and 'dreams for the future'.

In comparison, the presentation of London took the form of a mannequin parade at the Savoy hotel in front of a small 'distinguished audience [...] stars, celebrities and Britain's top fashion designers' (Figure 129 and 130). London is presented as exclusive and for a select few, while the Paris models are presented to crowds of spectators (Figure 128) and the city 'invites the whole world to join in her fashion parade'. The London couturiers' Savoy show is a working environment that started and ended with evening and dinner dresses, while each mannequin is introduced by name as is the designer of the model and type of fabric included. The models are described by the same narrator as a demonstration of 'grace', 'elegance', they are 'designed to look charming at any time of the day' and the couturiers' creativity is merely a reaction to the fabric, which 'enabled the designer to execute his idea'. During this 'non-stop parade of high fashion and fabrics' the audience examine their programmes, while the camera goes behind the scenes to explain that 'the whole secret of the unruffled elegance out-front is calm organisation and a well-planned schedule' (Figure 131). The London couturiers present a tradeshow; this is a job of work and these clothes are for sale, whilst the Paris mannequins are shown as inhabitants of the city, modeling for fashion photographers and attending a cocktail party which links them to the world of high fashion and the fantasy of the fashion magazine. Paris is presented as the city of art and its designers as artists while London is the city of trade and the members of the Incorporated Society the tradesmen of couture.

This chapter has considered a specific moment when wartime patriotism was subsumed into post-war reconstruction in order to construct a nationally acceptable identity for London's couture industry. The narrative this created was shaped by the continuation of austerity and the restrictions placed on the production and consumption of luxury goods. Yet it was also a time of optimism for the future represented by the installation of a Labour government with a policy of full employment and a comprehensive welfare state that offered a utopian vision of future plenitude for all.



Figure 129: *She Walks in Beauty*, Director: Terry Ashwood, Associated British Pathé, 1951





Figure 130: 'She Walks in Beauty', Director: Terry Ashwood,  
*Associated British Pathé*, 1951



Figure 131: 'She Walks in Beauty', Director: Terry Ashwood, *Associated British Pathé*, 1951

Within the socialist, egalitarian agenda of the government, which promoted controlled consumption, the expensive clothes produced for the elite could easily have held an uncertain position. Yet this was alleviated by the couturiers' restrained design aesthetic and participation in the country's export campaign, which constructed a narrative of national ownership whereby the creativity of the Incorporated Society was presented as beneficial to the nation. However, as the differences in the Pathè films produced for the Chambre Syndicale and Incorporated Society show, the narrative that evolved had a clear downside, as it both restricted the international identity of the London couturiers and undermined their creative reputation in comparison to Paris.

Through the difficult process of collaboration the Society's members had therefore achieved one of the main aims set out in its *Articles of Association* in 1942: 'to maintain and develop the reputation of London as a creative centre of fashion'.<sup>793</sup> London may not have supplanted Paris as the main source of inspiration for the international fashion industry, yet it had survived the war and an intense period of austerity to become an established complementary fashion centre. It had a clear national identity and although this did not compete with the creativity of Paris the skill and craftsmanship of London's couturiers was internationally recognised.

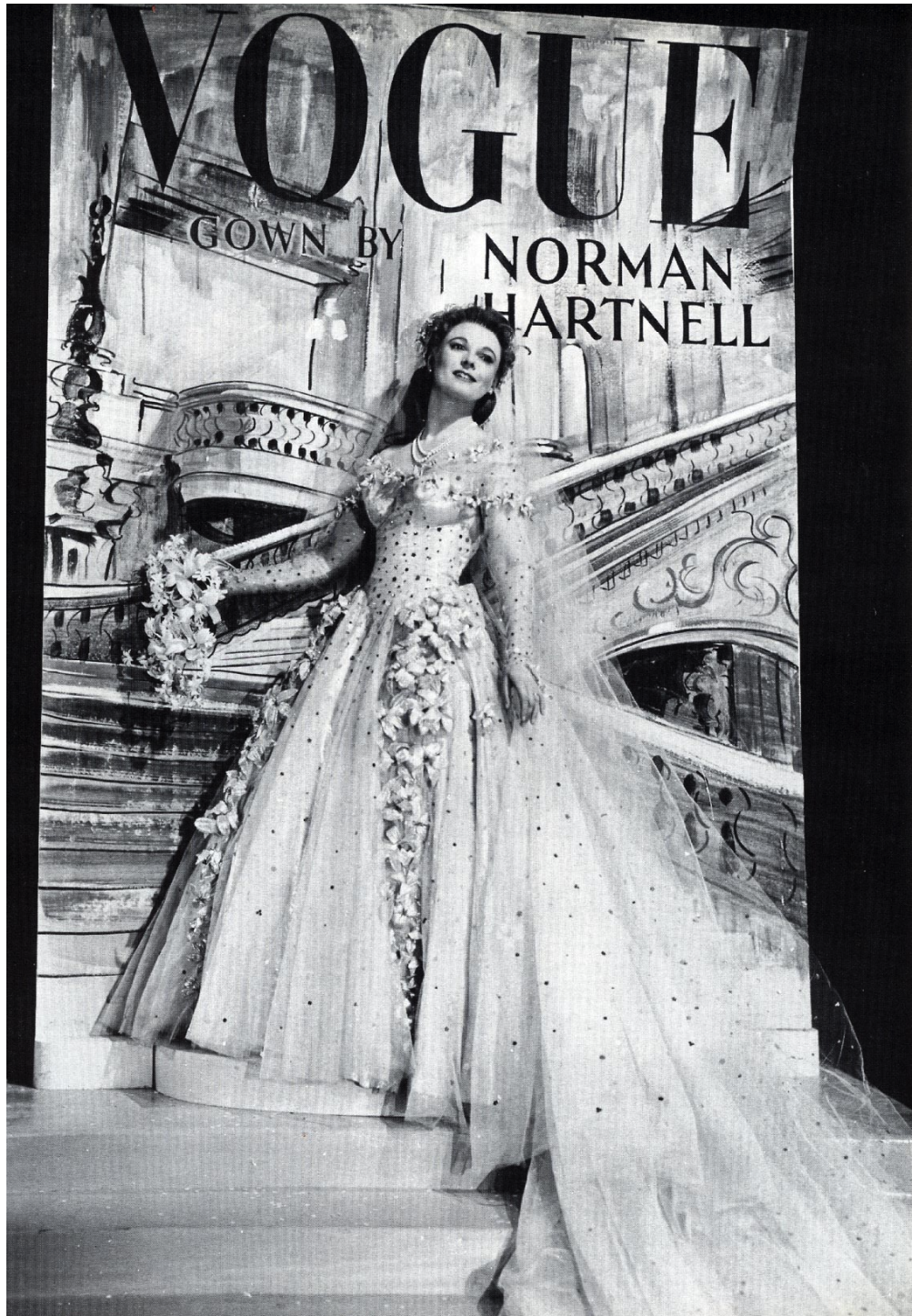
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<sup>793</sup> See Appendix 1, p. 353 and the discussion of these aims in the Introduction, p. 14 - 15



## Conclusion

The 'Top Ten' the Most Exclusive Professional Body in Britain



In June 1949, as the rationing of British clothing ended, the successful romantic comedy *Maytime in Mayfair* was released. Set in the world of London's elite fashion houses, the film follows the fortunes of a 'man-about-town' who inherits a couture house, becomes romantically involved with its manageress, and overcomes personal and business competition from a rival establishment. Based in glamorous and luxurious settings such as restaurants, apartments, and the streets of Mayfair and shot in 'glorious' Technicolor it represented optimism for both London and Britain's future prosperity and an end to austerity. The film was notable for its witty script and fantasy sequences; the most significant of these scenes saw mannequins, dressed by the members of the Incorporated Society, step out of the front covers of *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* each emblazoned with the name of the couturier (Figures 132). This filmic depiction demonstrates that Mayfair had retained its cultural currency as the epicenter of creative British fashion, whilst it is also a highly visual example of the hierarchical position these ten couturiers had achieved. They now had a clear professional identity, and occupied an enviable commercial position that separated their specific businesses from other fashion producers. By 1949 these were the 'Top Ten' of British fashion, a nomenclature used not only in the fashion press, but also at the BBC, in government departments and even by the designers themselves. London not only had a couture industry, but this industry had a clear definition with professional boundaries set by membership of the Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers.

This study has focused on the role designer-collaboration played in the construction and maintenance of the London couture industry throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Through a series of case studies of collaborations and related events that attempted to construct and reposition the London couture industry, it has revealed how this form of activity validated and supported this field of design. From the emergence of young dressmakers with stylistic confidence to couturiers with a specific professional identity, it has shown how a number of interrelated economic, social, and cultural factors created a supportive network, which gave form to London's identity as a fashion centre. The original contribution to knowledge of this thesis is based on how it has exposed the interaction of commercial forces and governmental policy with this process of identity formation and professionalisation. In so doing, the analysis of an extensive range of empirical material has uncovered many examples of the interconnected networks that were constructed within Britain's creative economy, offering a new interpretation of how



Figure 132: *Maytime in Mayfair*, 1949  
 (Top) Digby Morton Model  
 (Middle) Molyneux Model  
 (Bottom) Peter Russell Model



hierarchies were constructed within the fashion system. This research is particularly timely, as it precedes a trajectory within the academic debates that surround the fashion industry, seen most specifically in the 2014 launch of the European Union-funded project 'The Enterprise of Culture: international structures and connections in the fashion industry since 1945', with its specific aims to 'break new ground, using the fashion business to examine how various types of cultural encounters – between “core” fashion cities such as Paris and London and “peripheral” areas, between style labs and the high street, and between fibre makers, clothing manufacturers, and retailers – stimulated innovation, and created a new and competitive industry’.<sup>794</sup> This study therefore provides a clear example of the operation of London’s creative economy at an early point and provides an historical foundation to these debates

The study has shown that the London-based dressmaker’s initial accreditation as couturiers was based on the careful manipulation of a specific social and commercial arena and a design process that came from originality rather than adaptation. One of its key findings was that 1936 was the precise year that London was acknowledged as a fashion centre and that the emergence of an identifiable couture industry was an important element within this recognition. Yet more precisely it has argued that London’s original fashion centre status was the result of trade protectionism and political propaganda during a period of economic depression. In Britain, the protection of trade in the 1930s saw the implementation of covert propaganda, where, as a seemingly apolitical form the creativity and internationalism of London’s couturiers was harnessed to project Britain as a stable but also modern society. At the same time, in America, trade protectionism, underlay a concerted effort to dismantle the hegemony of Parisian design within the fashion system. The recognition that there were three fashion centres; New York, Paris and London, was part of a strategy to demonstrate that France was not the only nation that could create fashion.

The mechanisms of propaganda continued to support the London couture industry throughout the war, whether as part of a campaign to demonstrate that Britain could still ‘deliver the goods’ or as an ideological and morale boosting component of the People’s War. During the conflict, as the elitism inherent in couture production placed it in a precarious position, it was rendered more acceptable as it was recast through engagement with the government’s export campaign and Utility Scheme. This saw the construction of a protective narrative that reached back to historical arguments that

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<sup>794</sup> See details of the ‘Enterprise of Culture’ research project at <http://www.enterpriseofculture.leeds.ac.uk/>



promoted elite society's consumption of luxury as good for the nation. After the war, as the reconstruction of the economy became one of the government's key concerns, the recognition of the trade benefits of fashion centre status, ensured that the couturiers continued to be part of national projection.

In 1936, the government's policy to increase the dissemination of propaganda also coincided with the creation of the Fashion Group of Great Britain, which as a branch of an American organisation saw the commercial dictates of this transatlantic market play an integral role within the identity and practice of London couture. In America, the deficiencies in demand that accompanied the economic depression led to innovations that played a role within the mechanisms of fashion dissemination and consumption. Most importantly these recognised the need for the diffusion of information amongst competitors to facilitate better trade practice. The research undertaken into the Fashion Group of Great Britain has demonstrated the extent to which this national body drew on this American idea and constructed a network of creative practitioners as a route to the nation's economic security. Through an analysis of the garments presented in the Fashion Group's twice-yearly collaborative showcase of London couture, the thesis demonstrates the impact of the commercial dictates of the American fashion industry, which it shows were made most visible in the synchronisation of colour and design. These were indicative of the manipulations of design practice, by bodies such as the Fashion Group and the British Colour Council, undertaken to control creativity in order to bring stability to an industry that demanded constant change. The collaborative shows were therefore not only implemented to harness the couturiers' creativity to benefit other fashion producers in Britain by raising design standards, but also to regulate supply and demand as part of a wider transatlantic network. The thesis has therefore argued that much of the support for the professionalisation of the London couture industry was offered not to these individual businesses but as part of a process of the control and authentication of production within a period of rising mass consumption.

Almost all of the examples of designer-collaboration considered within this thesis were undertaken to increase British exports, often specifically to the North American market. Whilst in the interwar period the internationalism of the London couturiers supported the city's recognition as a fashion centre, the study has illustrated how intermediaries within the fashion system used collaboration to construct a binary understanding for the separate couture industries. This saw London cast as the centre for 'hard' tailored couture and Paris as the destination for 'soft' feminine fashions. This

challenged the idea of universality within the fashion centre system in order to create a specific external identity for British fashion. A response to the American market's need for product differentiation, this abbreviated narrative of London couture production was initially cultivated by the Fashion Group of Great Britain in the 1930s. The identity of London as the centre for conservative, beautifully tailored suits was then consolidated in the war, as practicality became a social necessity. In America this understanding of London couture was heightened by the stipulations of the Lend-Lease Agreement, which ensured that between 1941 and 1945 it only imported British woollen goods. During and immediately after the war as conspicuous consumption became economically, socially and politically problematic, the tailored suit was a further indication of the fashion authority of London's couturiers. The promotion of the practicality of this form of dress adhered to the needs for consumer abstinence and this restrained aesthetic saw the couturiers positioned as official tastemakers who could offer sanctioned guidance to the market.

By tracing the development of the narrative of London as the centre for hard couture, the thesis has demonstrated how the industry operated in an extraordinary tension between the desire to be international and the commercial need to represent the nation. It has shown that for the London couturiers this design consensus created unity but was also a recurrent point of tension as it affected their subjectivity and creative autonomy. The narrative of restrained, conservative tailored couture was particularly supportive for the London couturier's practice, but not for the authentication of creative fashions. After 1947, America's demand for both a new softer feminine silhouette and fashions that would stimulate the market was met by Parisian couturiers such as Christian Dior. Financed by and part of a huge textile conglomerate, Maison Dior was able to create extravagant models that gave the international fashion industry the guidance it demanded. Maison Dior's new business model, where the fundamental impetus was the creation of licensing agreements rather than bespoke clothing began a process that would alter the very nature of couture production. Yet as many Parisian couturiers began to 'shift the authenticity of their work from the design to the brand', the undercapitalized London couturiers continued to create wearable clothing that would sell to their clients rather than to manufacturers for reproduction under license.<sup>795</sup> During the time frame of this study, the national identity of 'hard' London couture was constructed as a reaction to specific social and commercial dictates and it was successful because it

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<sup>795</sup> Pouillard, 2013, pp. 815 – 835 (815)

adhered to the needs of the market. However, as the fashion system was transformed as it entered a period of affluence, this narrative would ultimately lose its agency and power.

The thesis has shown that the London couturiers were not only uncertain about the narratives that were constructed around their collaborative practice, but that they were also ambivalent about the aims set out in the Incorporated Society's Constitution. Even the seemingly innocuous objective '(f.) to organise or hold exhibitions of British fashion' proved problematic, as it was difficult for a designer to demonstrate their creative autonomy in collective showcases with their direct competitors.<sup>796</sup> This meant that after the war, the Incorporated Society's members very rarely participated in collective showcases and when they did it was primarily to ensure the goodwill of the textile industry and particular magazines such as *Vogue* and the influential export journal *The Ambassador*.<sup>797</sup> In fact, the only joint showcase that received unreserved support from all the Society's members was the instigation, from 1951 onwards, of the annual dress show they presented to the Queen (after 1953 the Queen Mother). This annual event was a source of inimitable prestige, which became a key component of the Incorporated Society's identity in the 1950s.

In light of the primary material explored throughout this thesis it should be concluded that the altruistic ambitions enshrined in the Society's Constitution were never really an objective for its designer-members, but rather a strategic response to both wartime propaganda and the design reform aspirations of intermediaries within the fashion industry. In particular, the minutes of the designer-members' meetings have shown that the couturiers did not see themselves as the 'shop window' for the British textile industry or the creative incubator for the wider fashion industry. It is apparent, in fact, that they were often completely against their cultural and creative capital being used, without financial remuneration, for the economic benefit of others. This is completely understandable as the Incorporated Society, unlike its Parisian counterpart the *Chambre Syndicale*, did not receive state funding through taxation of the textile industry and, apart from a twice-yearly reception paid for by the Board of Trade and small yearly subscription from the textile groups, it was financed by the designers themselves.

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<sup>796</sup> See Appendix 1.

<sup>797</sup> For a detailed consideration of the Incorporated Society's work with *The Ambassador* see Michelle Jones, 'A Performance of Culture and Commerce: British fashion promotion and the Royal Ballet's American and Canadian tours', *The Body: Connections with Fashion* (RMIT University Melbourne and International Foundation of Fashion Technology Institutes, 2008) pp. 424 – 43

In Britain the need for industrial distinction was heightened by the need to construct clear boundaries between the products of the 'bespoke' and 'wholesale' couture. Although the trade association of the later form of production, the London Model House Group, was relatively small in terms of the number of firms and employees, by 1950 this Group 'was beginning', in the view of the Apparel and Fashion Industry's Association, 'to gain an importance to the industry as a whole out of all proportion to its size [...] a style and design source that influenced all grades of manufacture far more than the couture does [...] in many ways, the wholesale couture section of our industry is unique; it has no parallel in any other part of the world'.<sup>798</sup> As the Incorporated Society's *Annual Report* from the same year pointed out this close rivalry had undermined the commercial viability of its members' businesses as:

To make it interesting to a London couturier to continue as a couturier is becoming increasingly difficult. The members, perforce, continue to 'throw their bread upon the waters' well aware that a multitude of businesses, small and large, will often benefit more than they can hope to do themselves. The members led the London fashion picture by being the first to group themselves together for export promotion, they were the first to arrange coordinated export collections, the first to arrange official entertainments and the first to have a government reception at Lancaster House. The Wholesale trade has followed and done everything on a much bigger scale. It is probably fair to assume that they have had a correspondingly richer reward. It is the function of the creative mind to stimulate new trends. It is intelligent for an industry to exploit the creative mind but the exploitation must be synonymous with encouragement.<sup>799</sup>

It can be suggested that if the Incorporated Society had worked more closely with the 'wholesale couture' it could well have constructed a differentiation that would have set London as a fashion centre apart from both Paris and New York. Yet despite requests to join forces this form of collaboration was rejected and it was only ever Hardy Amies that had membership of both the Incorporated Society and the Model House Group. Whilst this thesis contained little space for a full consideration of the interaction between the bespoke and wholesale couture industry, Elizabeth Tragenza's 2014 Masters Thesis on the London Model House Group, works on a closely related set of material, with similar

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<sup>798</sup> *A Report on the Present Position of the Apparel and Fashion Industry Prepared as a Basis for Guiding its Future Progress*, (Apparel and Fashion Industry's Association, 1950) pp. 14- 15 (BT 94/324, 1950)

<sup>799</sup> *Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers Annual Report for 1950*, 7 June 1951

intellectual concerns and adds much to this debate.<sup>800</sup> To fully explore the interaction of these two competing associations demands further research that would need to be underpinned by a different set of questions. The interrelation of these groups would need to be explored not as part of the hierarchical positioning and professional structure of the Incorporated Society in the late 1940s, but in how this was dismantled throughout the next two decades. This would demand a more consumer-orientated approach as it would need to examine this process as part of shifting consumer attitudes in the 1950s away from the consumption of made-to-measure dress towards the social acceptance of ready-to-wear.

For the purposes of this thesis, which centres around the professionalisation of the London couture industry and the fulfillment of the Incorporated Society's set aims, recognition of the unique competition presented by the wholesale couture and also the lack of external investment has been enough to explain the structure and operation of the Society, and particularly its shift towards exclusivity and a closed shop mentality. The recognition that the Incorporated Society became a 'closed shop' provides an appropriate conclusion for the concerns of this thesis. The first references to this idea began to surface in both governmental records and newspaper reports at the end of 1947. For example, the Board of Trade and the Council of Industrial Design called a meeting with William Haigh the Society's textile vice-president to discuss this problem, whilst a campaign was launched by five London couturiers not in the Society (Rahvis, Lachasse, Mattli, Strassner and Clive Duncan), which called for it to be abolished and replaced by a national body called the 'British Syndicate of Haute Couture' to which anyone with proven ability could gain entrance.<sup>801</sup> The *Sunday Express* reported their view that, 'the Top Ten, with Hartnell as chairman, give the impression that they don't want new members. They represent powerful interests and appear quite happy in the preserve they have created [...] It is the most exclusive professional body in Britain.'<sup>802</sup> The selection process for membership of the Society was indeed prohibitive as the decision was taken by the designers already included who wanted to protect their own business interests from their competitors. Applications to join were constantly rejected, usually on the basis of lack of design originality or the quality and craftsmanship of their production. This meant that after the war the Society remained small. For example it did

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<sup>800</sup> Elizabeth Tragenza, London before it swung: British ready-to-wear under the Model House Group and Fashion House Group 1946-1966 (Unpublished Thesis, Royal College of Art, 2014)

<sup>801</sup> *MISDM*, 8 September 1947

<sup>802</sup> 'Paradise (W1) Has Trouble', *Sunday Express*, 12 October 1947

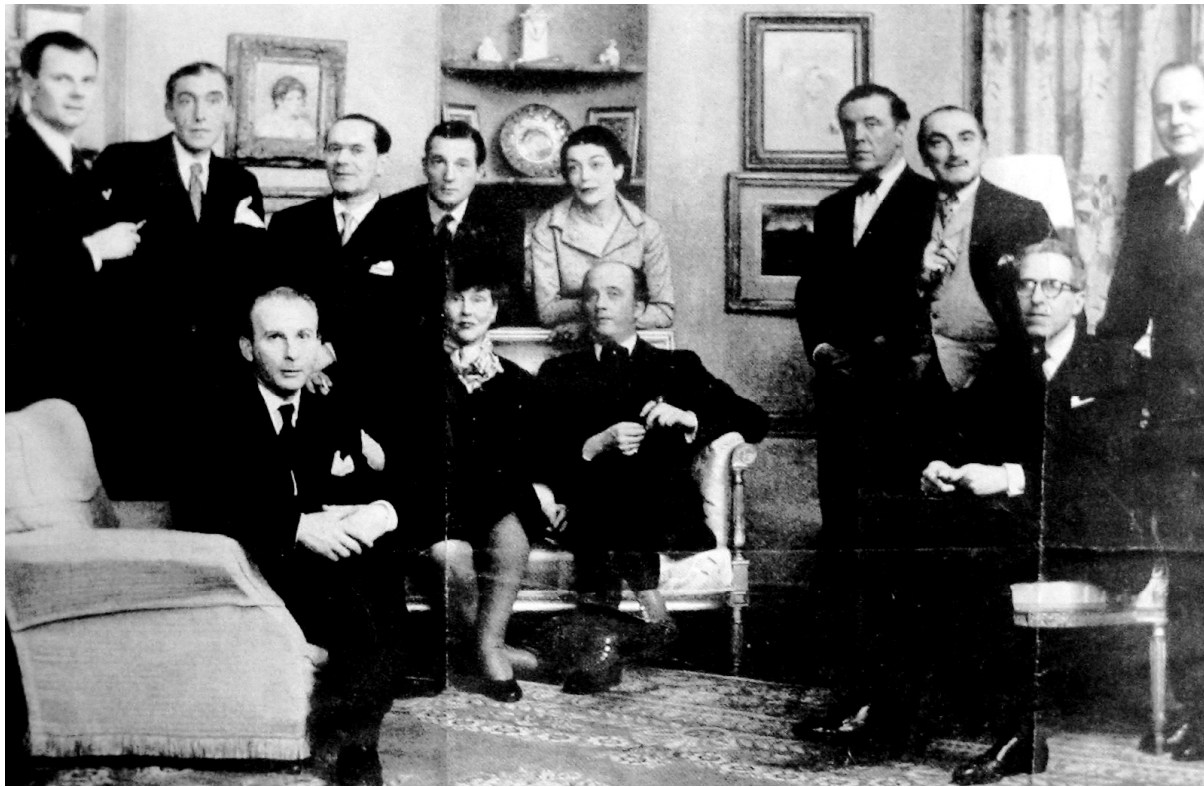


Figure 133: The Incorporated Society 'The Most Exclusive Professional Body in Britain'  
 Photographed in 1953 by Milton Green

'Britain Dresses Up for the Queen: Clothes for the Coronation Year are Rich, Regal and Reserved', *Life*, Volume 34, Number 13, 1953

Left to Right (Standing) John Cavanagh, Owen of Lachasse, Jo Mattli, Hardy Amies, Lady Jane Clark (President) Norman Hartnell, Peter Russell, Digby Morton  
 (Seated) Michael Sherard, Madam Champcommunal of Worth, Charles Creed

not accept any new members until Guiseppi Mattli in 1948, when Angele Delanghe resigned, followed by Michael Sherard in 1949. The house of Lachasse then joined in the October 1950 after Bianca Mosca's resignation and subsequent death. Then after Molyneux retired and both his London and Paris houses closed in September 1951, it was then another year until the Paris trained couturier John Cavanagh was granted membership, followed in 1953 by Michael Donnelly and Ronald Patterson and finally Clive Evans in 1962. This exclusivity was entirely understandable, as the Incorporated Society was virtually self-appointed and its members were particularly protective of the hierarchical industrial position their collaboration had created.

The recognition that, by the end of the 1940s, the Incorporated Society had become a 'closed shop' allows clear conclusions to be drawn about the process of professionalisation, a central theme that has run throughout this thesis. If a profession is an occupation that has achieved a special level of prestige in society and professionalisation is the process by which high status is attained, 'the aim', as Geoffrey Millerson has shown, 'is to create exclusiveness, as membership confers status on the individual'.<sup>803</sup> The Incorporated Society was a professional association that operated as a vehicle of separation and distinction from other businesses. It legitimated its member's identity as creative couturiers and rendered those outside itself bogus and unprofessional. Ultimately, for the designers, collaboration within the Incorporated Society was a route to business protection and prestige rather than the broader aims stated in its Constitution.

Ultimately, as the separate chapters demonstrate, the survival of the London couture industry was set, not only by what the designer-members themselves were willing and able to do on their own initiative, but also by what social and cultural stipulations, industrial and governmental bodies, 'fashion intermediaries', competitors and their clients (both real and imagined), allowed them to achieve. This study has emphasised how the London couturiers established and maintained collaborations and created the Incorporated Society in order to successfully navigate a particularly difficult economic period for this field of luxury production. Yet, it has shown that the designers involved were always ambiguous about collaboration and about the altruistic aims set out in the Society's *Articles of Association*. At a time of economic and political turmoil, austerity and reconstruction, networks were constructed around the couture industry that ensured its professional recognition. Yet as the designers moved into a period of

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<sup>803</sup> Millerson, 1964, p.10



affluence their collaboration within the Incorporated Society retreated into a vehicle of business protection and it lost its relevance to these external networks of support. Collaboration therefore never achieved the wider relevance expected of it and the Incorporated Society's move towards being a 'closed shop' rather than a 'shop window', restricted entry to fresh talent. Over the next two decades, as the members grew older, retired or continued to tread a well-worn design path the London couture industry could not compete with new currents within fashion and the needs of an international fashion centre.

## Appendix

### 1

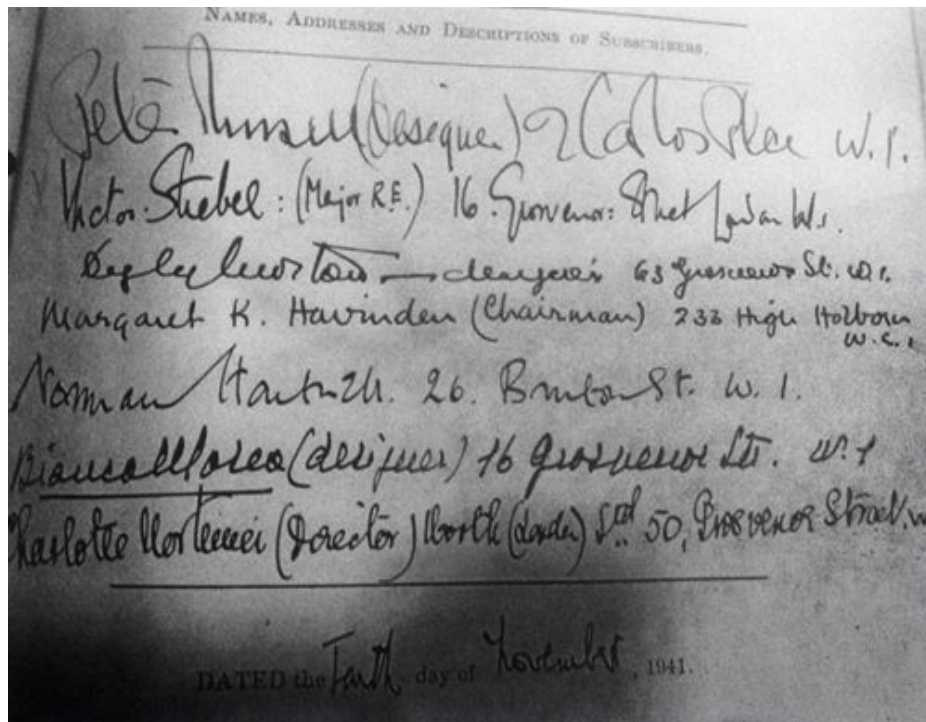
#### Memorandum and Articles of Association of The Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers

(Originally drawn up on 10 November 1941, Registered 6 January 1942)

1. The name of the Company (hereinafter called "the Society" is "The Incorporated Society of London Fashion Designers"
2. The registered office of the Society will be situate in England
3. The objects for which the Society is established are: -
  - a. To maintain and develop the reputation of London as a creative centre of fashion
  - b. To collaborate with groups of fabric and other manufacturers, and with companies, firms and individuals, with a view to increasing the prestige of British fashions, and promoting the sales of British dresses, gowns, fabrics and dress accessories in home and overseas markets.
  - c. To provide a centre for the collation of fashion articles to create fashion collections, and to promote exhibitions of British fashions at home and abroad.
  - d. To assist fashion designers by protecting their original designs, enabling them to exchange information to their mutual advantage, arranging dates for their respective showings, fostering professional and trade interests of persons engaged in creating British fashions, developing the standards of skilled workmanship and representing their views to government and trade bodies and to the press.
  - e. To maintain and improve the professional status and standards of conduct of those engaged in the creation of fashions.
  - f. To organise or hold exhibitions of British fashions.
  - g. Subject to section 14 of the Companies Act, 1929, so far as applicable to purchase, take on lease, or in exchange, hire or otherwise acquire any real or personal property or rights of any kind which may be deemed necessary or convenient with a view to the promotion of the objects of the Society, and in particular any buildings, or any parts of the same, or land for the purposes of the erection of buildings thereon and any furniture, books and other properties.
  - h. To borrow or raise money, and to issue debentures, debenture stock, or other securities, and for the purpose of securing any debt or obligation of the Society, to mortgage and charge the undertaking and all or any part of the property and assets of the Society.
  - i. To receive donations and contributions from companies, firms and persons desirous of assisting the work of the Society.
  - j. To draw, make, accept, endorse, execute and issue bills of exchange, promissory notes and other negotiable and transferable instruments.
  - k. To invest and deal with the moneys of the Society not immediately required in such investments and in such manner as may from time to time be deemed expedient.
  - l. To establish, subsidize, promote, take over, co-operate or amalgamate with, or become a member of or affiliated to, or act as trustee or agent for,

or manage or lend money or other assistance to, any organization, association, society or body, corporate or unincorporated, with objects altogether or in part similar to the objects of this Society, and which is calculated directly or indirectly to advance these objects or any of them. Provided that it is prohibited by its constitution from distributing its income and property amongst its members to an extent at least as great as is imposed on this Society by or under Clause 4 hereof.

- m. To sell, lease, grant licences, easements and other rights over, and in any other manner deal with or dispose of, the property, assets, rights and effects of the Society, or any part thereof, for such consideration as may be thought fit, as may be deemed expedient with a view to promoting the objects of the Society
- n. To undertake and execute any trusts which may seem conducive to any of the objects of the Society.
- o. To procure the registration or incorporation of the Society in or under the laws of any place outside England.
- p. To subscribe or guarantee money for any national, charitable, benevolent, or other useful object, or for any purpose which may be considered likely directly or indirectly to further the objects of the Society.
- q. To grant pensions or gratuities to any employees or ex-employees of the Society, or the relations, connections or dependants of any such persons, and to establish or support associations, institutions, clubs, funds and trusts which may be considered calculated to benefit any such persons or advance the objects of the Society.
- r. To do all or any of the things and matters aforesaid in any part of the world, and either as principles or agents.



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*The Body: Connections with Fashion*, 10th Annual Conference of International Foundation of Fashion Technology Institutes, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, 8 – 9 March 2008.

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## **Exhibitions**

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### **Interviews**

Amy de la Haye, (curator) Conversation, November 2007.  
Stuart Aitken (Apprentice Michael of Carlos Place) 3 December 2007.  
Jon Moore (Womenswear designer Hardy Amies) 23 March 2008.  
Murray Arbeid (Couturier) 6 April 2008.  
Michael Guest (Hartnell ready-to-wear designer) 2 April 2008.  
Ann Ryan (Secretary of the Incorporated society) 28 April 2009.  
Ken Partridge (Close friend of Hardy Amies) 17 April 2009.  
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